



## Teenage Dirtbag by MeltingCrown

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**Summary:** Diane thought he was a complete douchebag. Billy thought she was a lame loner. And in the background, was a supernatural entity threatening to swallow their small country town whole.

## 1. PART I::: Chapter One: Plagiarism

Diane finished eating her sandwich in contentment at the students of the town strolls through the parking lot. She tucked a stray strand of loose blonde curls behind her ear, opening up her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were grey at the stormy clouds rolling through Hawkins. She smiled fondly as she saw Dustin with his friends in the distance. Funny kid, she liked babysitting for him. The money wasn't all too bad either.

Everything was quiet until the peace was shattered by the angry roaring of a Camero's engine. The car came to a screeching halt in the front of the parking lot and out stepped Billy Hargrove, slamming the door shut with his foot. He tucked his hands into his back pockets of his tight jeans, surveying the area like he was searching for something before sneering in disdain and walking off. He fished out a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros tucked in the front of his denim jacket while walking.

People loved to talk, and right now Billy Hargrove was at the centre of it all. The girls fawned over him like he was one of the rockers on their posters. She saw the way his eyes grazed over them like he was too good for all of them. And they loved it. Rolling her eyes she stood up, and gathered the heavy chemistry books into her arms, tucking them close to her chest as she went to class. Billy Hargrove from California should've stayed there.

Diane passed Billy in the hallway as he look on in disinterest at the one-conversation he seemed to be having with some of the most popular girls in school all vying for his attention. The girls fawned over him like he was one of the rockers on their posters. The ever cool Andie Reynolds had been turned into a hair-twirling puddle, and her friends Cindy and Penny weren't faring any better. His eyes trailed to Andie's curvy figure.

He didn't care about anything. And they loved it. He swaggered around the school like he was some type of discount Billy Zabka. Finally having enough he took off towards the room Diane has just walked into. "Meet me by the Camero after school." He told Cindy over his shoulder, before disappearing into the chemistry classroom.

Cindy was met with a squealed "Oh my God!" from Penny and eyes narrowed in jealousy and anger from the queen bee Andie. It should've been Andie who got to be with Cali before anyone else did. That was her right. At least, according to her.

Inside the room Diane shut out the gossip around her. All she wanted to do was get out of this small town she had grown up in. Everyone was immature and thought Hawkins was where everything began and ended. Diane wanted more. She wanted to get out. She wanted to be with grownups and people who didn't just talk behind others back and where gossip wasn't the most interesting topic of conversation.

She had heard the rumours floating around. Everyone had. The whole reason Billy was here in Hawkins in the first place was because he had killed someone in cold blood back in California. The events leading up to her were different, but it all ended the same: murder. They had to move states just to keep him from being thrown in jail, that's what they said.

The class was halfway through and nearly everyone had fallen asleep. Diane stole a glance at him again. He was opening and closing his lighter, opening and extinguishing the fire. This was a small town and people just liked to talk. It couldn't be true - could it?

"Mr. Hargrove," Mrs. Coppersmith drawled. "We don't support arsonists here in Hawkins. Either you put that lighter away or you can have a talk with Principle Geller about your fiery passions."

Someone snickered at the comment but one look from Billy quickly shut them up. He harshly shoved the lighter into his jacket pocket. He threw her a look that meant, *You happy now, you old crone?*

Mrs. Coppersmith was indeed satisfied. She turned another page and went back to her monologue about something or the other in chemistry. Billy let his eyes glaze over. The whole class the only one who was awake was that younger blonde girl, a year below them. Apparently she was smart enough to be in the big kids club for the majority of her classes. She had all the answers to all of Coppersmith's answers. Billy's eyes were rolling into the back of his head by the end of it.

As the bell rang students stood up grumbling, thankful the class was over as they shoved their books into their backs and headed out for a smoke or to get together in groups and giggle over who know's what passed for entertainment in this town. He headed outside for a needed break. No one seem to pay attention to Goldilocks as she took her books and left.

But Billy saw her, walking out alone and coming in alone every class. Her head was always stuck in the books and her messy hair always shielded her from everything happening around her. Jesus, what a sad life. She'd be too easy. He took a final drag from the Marlboro before crushing it beneath his foot. Pushing off the hood of his car he stalked forwards as she disappeared from the corner. He knew exactly where she was going.

He followed right into the library. The girl was already sat down in the corner with her books and papers out, scribbling quickly.

Sauntering over to her he gave her a wink. As he leaned over the table, his necklace swayed back and forth in a lazy manner. His tongue swept across his bottom lip, teeth exposing as his smile widened. "Hey there. Diane, isn't it?"

She looked at him warily. "Yeah."

"We got some classes together."

"Yeah, we do."

"Of course we do, I'd remember someone as attractive as you." He winked.

*Bullshit.* She thought. *The kind of girls you hang out with in the back of your car on top of the hill at Lovers Lane don't wear cable-knit sweaters or corduroy pants.*

"Thanks?"

He leaned his head against his palm, eyes flicking across her face like he was trying to memorise it. "Girls should have beauty and brains."

She toyed with the edge of the page, unsure where he was going with all of this. "I guess."

He pushed the papers across the desk. "You're a smart girl. Smart enough to figure out these assignments."

Billy twirled a lock of her soft hair around his finger and suppressed a gleeful smile at the way her cheeks tinged red as he flustered her. He leaned in a little closer, savouring the feeling of victory - albeit a victory so easy it was cheap. All the girls in Hawkins were easy and cheap in one way or another though. "And in return," he breathed, "You might just get to ride with me once, maybe even twice."

"I - I - " She stuttered. He forced himself not to roll his eyes as he pushed himself off the desk.

"Thanks Diane." He didn't look at her as he walked away, pushing the heavy library doors open.

After he left she finally collected herself again, free from his smothering presence. Pursing her lips she looked at his assignment. No, she decided eventually, she wasn't going to do them. He already didn't care about her because she was just a nerd to him, and he sure wasn't going to be grateful that she did his assignments. And there sure wasn't anything for her to be gained from doing them. Besides Billy not hating her, of course. But he would get back to pretending like she didn't even exist within the day, just like Andie and the others did.

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A week passed by quickly. Billy didn't even spare a glance at Diane once, until it was time for assignment due date.

He put his hand on the locker right next to hers and waited impatiently. She was entirely distracted as she took the books out one by one from her open locker. Diane closed her locker and jumped a foot in the air when she was Billy there, waiting expectantly.

"Where's the paper?"

Swallowing she fished into her backpack and gave it to him. With a smirk he leaned in, biting his lower lip. "Thanks Dee." And then he slid around her, making his way someplace to trace over the answers

to make the handwriting his very own.

As he sat outside his eyes flickered up to see there was ten minutes left to class. That was enough time to do a few pages. As he looked down his brow furrowed. Quickly he turned the next page, and the next and the next - that bitch! They were all blank. Slamming his fist on the table he got up, dragging the papers off the desk and stalking towards the classroom. She had put him out in the cold. Now he was going to go to class and fail. The bruise he got better not be on his face or that blonde bitch was going to have fun with him - it was what he would deserve after.

Diane Dobler was nothing but a squeaky mouse, and he was going to steer her right into the trap.

Being the last one into the room he kicked the door closed with his foot.

He threw himself into his seat. Sensing his presence, her petite shoulders drew together. A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes.

The rest of the class trudged in. The bell rang and the class began. Billy's jaw tightened as the assignment were passed to the front and given to Coppersmith.

Ms. Coppersmith sighed and looked up from the sheets of papers. "Mr. Hargrove?" Billy crossed his arms in response and threw himself back in his seat. "Your assignment?"

"I ain't got it." He said through gritted teeth.

"You mean to tell me you had a week to do it and you have nothing to show?" She looked up her spectacles.

"Something like that." He sneered, before his eyes flickered over to Diane. They were hard and cold as the black ice on the winter roads.

Pressing her lips together she quickly looked away and sunk into her seat. Billy Hargrove wasn't as charming as he had been a week ago. Her heart was pounding in her chest and her face reddening with dread.

As soon as class ended she sprang out of her seat and sped out of the room, holding her books tightly to her chest. Luckily Chemistry was the last class of the day. Her eyes kept darting around but Billy was nowhere to be seen. When she walked across the parking lot with her head down, his Camero was already gone.

Maybe he had just been intimidating her. He was already gone. Billy probably realised she wasn't just some nerd who was going to do his assignments because he smiled at her. Pressing her lips together she kept walking home, but she couldn't get the lump out of her throat.

She walked through the football field and onto one of the backroads. The route was quiet and peaceful. Still, she was hoping to get new headphones soon. The babbling brook was only entertaining for so long.

In the distance behind her she heard the engine of a car. The closer it got the louder it got until she inhaled sharply. Diane recognised that roar. Looking over her shoulder the dread came right back and made her heart beat faster against her ribcage. It was His car.

She tried walking faster in desperation. But she stood no chance.

The car came to a screeching halt next to her, rubber burning. She could see him from the drivers seat through the rolled down passengers window. And he looked ready to kill. Billy ripped the ray bans off and threw them onto the backseat.

"Get in Diane!" He snapped, face tinged red in fury. She swallowed. "I just want to have a little talk." He said through gritted teeth.

Diane wasn't so sure those rumours were really rumours anymore. For a split second she saw herself floating in the quarry like that kid last year. "Look Billy -"

"Get in!" He roared.

She flinched and after a moment crawled into the car. She door had barely shut before she was flung back into the seat at the momentum as his foot slammed onto the speeder.

His fingers drummed the steering wheel in agitation. Quickly she put



the seatbelt on. The landscape was a blur of browns and greens. The atmosphere weighed heavy on her and she bit her lip as she stared out the window, occasionally looking at him out the corner of her eye.

When he spoke his voice was softer, but the sharp edge was unmistakeable. "Thought we had a little deal, Dobler."

"You-" Her throat closed up and she swallowed, "You made that deal. Not me."

Billy didn't reply. Instead he lit a cigarette, taking a sharp drag. He looked at her, blowing the smoke right into her face.

"Listen here dweeb. Right now you're driving in a fuckin' Camero with me which is a shitton more interesting than anything else happening in this cowtown. I can give you a little taste of what life is actually like outside your grandma-knitted sweaters and out-dated chem books no one reads but you." He took another drag and looked out at the seemingly unending road. "I can also make your life a living hell."

Diane laced her hands together, and stared right out at the road with him. "I like here." She muttered. "I - I don't really care about the car, or that you're Billy Hargrove, or that you came from California, alright?"

He threw the cigarette out the window. Who fucking cared if it was still lit? The town would be better off burned to the ground anyway. The smell of smoke was better than the smell of cow shit.

"Diane-"

"Why me?" She nearly choked on the words.

"Because you're the smartest in the class." He spat.

For a moment there was only the dull roar of the engine as they flew down the road. She looked out the window, trying to slow her heart.

Billy put a hand on her knee and she jumped in surprise. He tightened his grip.

"Ever been touched before, Diane?"

"No." She squeaked in honesty.

His thumb caressed her calf. "Don't tell me you don't think about it." He purred. "I've thought about it Diane."

*Like hell he had.*

The car was still speeding along the road. And he continued to stare right at her as if he wasn't driving at all. His warm calloused palm moved higher up, resting on her thigh. "And there's no way you haven't thought about me either - and don't lie to me Diane, that would make you a naughty little girl." He breathed, drawing out naughty like the sinful word it was. "And I'm the first person who's ever touched you like this, and I can be the first person who does a whole lot more. Hell, I'll probably be the only person who ever touches you. Someone's gotta make that sacrifice."

"Get off." She whispered.

"Diane-"

"I said get off!" She yelled, shoving at him. The car swerved and she screamed. Christ they were going to die. He laughed with exhilaration. "I'll do it! Alright I'll do it - just look at the road, Jesus-"

He released his grip and grinned, licking his lips. She was playing right into his hands and he loved every moment. The car straightened as he focused on the road again. Still it sped down the road.

"Stop the car! I said stop the car!" She yelled at him. Diane was about to whack him again. Her breathing was coming out in shallow gasps.

Billy raised a brow and glanced at her like she was the crazy one. With a heavy sigh he began slowing down. Diane grabbed the backpack, and before the car had even come to a stop she had jumped out.

"I'm expecting that paper by tomorrow before class, Diane baby." He leered.

And before she could answer he had shot off, leaving her alone in the middle of the woods by the side of the road. Diane placed her head in her hands and lowered herself to the ground, trying to steady her breathing. He had nearly killed the both of them. And he had fucking loved it. Billy Hargrove was reckless, manipulative, aggressive and likely a murderer. And he wasn't going to let her go unless he found someone else to do his work for him.

Tears sprung into her eyes in frustration. He was right. That was the first time someone had touched her. But she hadn't wanted that smug bastard to be the first one. At least he hadn't taken her first kiss. She promised herself that, at least would be romantic with someone she loved. Whoever that was.

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The next door she handed him the assignment without looking at him.

"That's better." He said mockingly. Even after he had left his cologne lingered. It would've been nice, masculine - but it reminded her of him too much, and soured the smell.

The assignments were turned in without incident and Billy didn't acknowledge her for the rest of the day.

Just as Diane was counting down the last minute of English Lit, a knock came on the door and one of the administrative assistances peaked through. "Can Ms. Dobler please go straight to the Principles after?"

The response was a wave of "Ooooh's" from the class and Diane tightening her hands around the book in response. Why the Principle? She had never been called to the Principles before.

After eternity the bell rang and she dragged herself out of her seat. Heavy feet moved one by one closer to the Principles office.

The secretary looked up and gave a brief smile. "Go on in, dear."

Diane obliged.

Inside wasn't just Principle Geller - but Billy Hargrove too. Geller motioned to the other side. While Diane was sweating in fear, Billy was sprawled in the seat and looking so bored, Diane was sure he would slide off the seat in agony soon. How the hell did he do that? How didn't he care about *anything*? What was wrong with him?

"Ms. Dobler, Mr. Hargrove, do you know why you're here?"

Diane shook her head feverently.

Principle Geller laced his hands together and leaned forwards with a frown. "There are serious consequences for plagiarism."

"What?" Diane squeaked. Billy raised a brow.

"Your assignment for chemistry. Did you know the both of you have the exact same answers?"

Diane's mouth opened and closed several times. Billy hid a smile. He thought she might just implode. This must be the worst thing that's ever happened in her little life.

"I'm very disappointed. Ms. Coppersmith and I were discussing how to proceed . . . now, since the both of you do seem to like cooperation so much, it would only seem fitting you two - in *equal* measure - complete a seventy-five page essay on the current topic. It will be no more, no less. It's due within two weeks."

Billy shrugged and got up. "That's all?"

"That's all Billy."

He was out the door before Diane could even process. "I'm sorry, did you just say the both of us, will be working *together*?"

"Is that a problem?"

She wanted to cry. Shaking her head in defeat she stood up. "No, it's not a problem."

"Good, I thought it sounded like a better solution than possibly having to admit fraudulent behaviour and harming your chances of getting

into university. I know how much it means to you."

"Yeah," she whispered, "Thank you Mr. Geller."

Outside the room she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. She heard footsteps getting closer. Whatever student it was, God did she wish she had their carefree life right now.

"Get ready for two weeks with me you won't forget." Billy said softly next to her. Her eyes sprang open. He was the student in the hallway. Diane wanted to scream.

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**A/N:** The first few chapters including this one are being re-worked as they could be much better. It won't affect the rest of the story and chapters already out.

## 2. Chapter Two: After Hours

**Thank you for all the loves, followers, and reviews! Y'all awesome! If you like, reviews would make me so so happy!**

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With a face flushed red from running she made it to the top of the driveway. But the driveway was empty, except for the garbage can. She threw her head back in exasperation.

It had all been for nothing. Dustin's mom had already taken off.

Diane Dobler, the professional babysitter who couldn't even show up on time. She hoped Dustin's mom wasn't too disappointed. Next time she was definitely bringing a treat for Mews.

The lights were on all over the house, except most of the blinds were pulled down which was unusual. She rang on the doorbell. When Dustin didn't answer she tried again, feeling a rise of concern. He always answered the door on the first try, skidding to the front of the door. Where was he?

Finally he came into view, walking hurriedly. She began to feel suspicion at the look on his face.

He opened the door a fraction and looked through it with an eyeball. "Oh, uhh hey Dee. So I know you're supposed to babysit and all, but maybe we can just postpone until next week?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Dustin, I know I'm late and I'm sorry"

"Forgiven! So if you could come back next week?" He asked hopefully.

"No. This is me showing up for babysitting, not me missing a dentist's appointment and you're not a secretary. Now open the door. I'll make popcorn to make up for it." She asked.

"Let me distract you with these pearly whites." He said and then made a purring sound, *Grrrrr*

Before she could reply he shut the door on her face.

She was so shocked she didn't react for a moment. What had just happened? Had he *purred*? Dustin began back towards his room.

Oh no he didn't. She yelled his name again as she skirted round the house. Diane banged on the balcony window. Ah! She couldn't see him, he had pulled the blinds shut there too. What in the hell was that kid doing tonight?

She banged on the window with both hands. "Dustin! I will take babysitting to a literal level if you don't open the door!"

He peaked out between the blinds. "I don't think sitting on me is a very babysitter-ly thing to do."

Placing her hands on her hips she closed her eyes to gather herself. "Dustin, can you please just open the door?"

"I really can't Dee, sorry. I promise I'll tell my mom you were here and that you had the best night of babysitting you had experienced."

"She has to see me to pay me. That means I have to be there to take the money."

"I'll let her know you left a minute before she could home and I'll bring the money into school tomorrow." Then he looked behind him. "Sorry Dee, gotta go!"

"What? Dustin! Hey!" She banged on the window. But he was gone.

She looked up at the stars, hoping they would tell her the answers to some things that were more complicated than the universe: kids. Specifically Dustin and his friends. She had decided to give up last year. They all ran off with the same urgency as if they had the world to save. When she had tried to inquire they had come with so many stories she had simply backed away.

She trudged around the house on last time, banging on another window. Dustin came back.

"Kid, can you at least tell me if you're in trouble?"

"Uhhhhhhhh . . . no, nope, absolutely not. I have never been safer."

"Why do I not believe you?"

"I don't know why you wouldn't, have I ever let your trust down? Have these pearly whites *ever* let you down?" He asked, before purring again. A second later he shut the blinds.

"Oh my god! I am going to make your next babysitting session suck so bad." She yelled.

He didn't return.

Besides acting like a brat who was hiding something he didn't look like he was in any danger, and why would he be? He was probably just acting out. Maybe it was a win-win situation.

Still, she went around the house to try the doors anyway. But they were all locked.

Biting her lip she considered staying outside until Dustin's mom came home. But it was getting chilly out and she didn't want to spend the next few hours on the stoop in the cold, bored out of her mind. Plus, while she really did need to babysit him, she also trusted him. He was a responsible, if not infuriating, kid. His charm wasn't going to let him off the hook this time though.

Oh was he going to get it tomorrow at school. She'd trudge over to the elementary school and reprimand him during recess.

Diane hitched her bag onto her bag again and made her way down the driveway. The leaves kicked up around her feet as she walked down the empty road.

After a while walking in silence she heard the familiar roaring of a car and rolled her eyes. This was not what she wanted or needed.

The car screeched to a halt again, right next to her. She kept walking, and the Camero kept up with ease.

"And what are you doing, walking all alone?" He asked with his usual drawl.



Diane hiked the backpack up, refusing to look anyway but straight ahead. "Enjoying the fall weather."

"I got a proposal that's right up your alley, Dobler. How about that assignment?"

"Now?" She stopped walking.

"No, next year. Yes, *now*. Get in." He tapped the passengers door.

Diane looked down the street. Another two miles and she could be home with a mug of hot cocoa, Billy Hargrove the furthest thing from her mind.

But she also need to finish that assignment. Then she'd never see him again.

With a heavy she got in, slamming the door shut after.

"We're going to the library, right?" She asked warily.

He took a deep drag from the cigarette. "Where else we'd go?"

He turned up the volume of the radio until it nearly vibrated her bones. Rock song after rock song blasted through the speakers until they sped into the empty parking and coming to a jerking halt that sent her forwards in her seats, giving her whiplash.

"Look Dobler, it's home sweet home."

She rolled her eyes and got out of the metal deathtrap quickly.

The lot was mostly empty, and the sun was nearly down. Who else would be spending time in the library so later besides her? And Billy, apparently and unfortunately.

Mrs. Wentz waved to her and Diane greeted her right back. Billy sent the old lady a wink that made her blush. Diane stared at the both of them. How? *How?* How was it they all found him so desirable? He was a terrible, selfish human being.

They sat in the back, hidden from view. Towards the front where a

few dozen of people still here, mulling over the readings.

Without a word spoken between each other both of them sat down. Diane opened up several books and a calculator, Billy played with his lighter. She wished he would do some work. It wasn't as if she hadn't already spent a night up far too late compensating for him doing nothing.

The hours passed quickly as Diane made detailed notes after notes.

Billy appeared to have fallen asleep. She looked at him with disdain. It was October and he acted like they were still in sunny California.

"You can touch it you know." He said as he caught her staring at his chest, open an eye.

"Just wondering if I can help fix your shirt, it seems to be missing a button or ten." She muttered.

"Dobler, you can barely hide your lust. You have a change of panties in that oversized back of yours?"

She was speechless at his audacity.

"Just . . . pretend to do some work, alright? And stop talking to me."

"Hit a nerve?"

"I'm not talking to you." She said as she finished a page of calculations.

Billy shook his head and leaned back in his seat, lighting another cigarette. He dropped them on the floor after he was finished.

If she tried to scold him it would just begin an endless conversation going nowhere. And he wouldn't bother finding an ashtray. Smoking wasn't even allowed in the library. At least the smell would diffuse faster than if they were in the librarians front office.

Billy gave a heavy sigh, playing with his lighter.

He continued like this for ten minutes, and Diane stared at the pages

even harder, hoping she would eventually block him out.

It didn't work.

Billy leaned forwards, whipping the lighter shut. "See, I have a date later. You wouldn't mind if i just left you to the boring stuff while I went and had a life, would you?"

Diane placed her hands on the books and looked up in disdain. She was sure her idea of a date and Billy's idea were quite different. "Actually I do mind. We wouldn't be here in the first place if you hadn't plagiarised."

Leaning forwards he revealed his row of perfect white teeth. His tongue swept over them. "No, we wouldn't be in this situation if you had just done as you were supposed to."

"Be like the other girls in this school and do what you say? No thanks."

"Bet you think you're real smart." He threw himself back in the chair. "You're not all wrong. For a small town girl in a small town world, you're smart. That doesn't say much about the real world, does it? Enjoy it while it lasts, Dobler."

With a heavy sigh she went back to reading over the stupid chemistry book. She hated him and she hated working with him.

She smiled to herself as she finally finished a part of the assignment. The math had been painstakingly difficult. And she had done it all without him.

"Try to contain yourself, I know this is the funnest thing you got going on here, but don't drag me down." He drawled.

"We might not be in California, but we actually do have fun here." Diane said.

He snorted. "Yeah, and what's real entertainment here then? Cow tipping?"

"Pumpkin rolling actually." She replied absent-mindedly as she wrote

down more notes.

Ignoring him was more difficult than planned.

She struggled to finish another section. Looking over the directions again she bit her lip. Great, she needed a book that wasn't here. And she was pretty sure it wasn't in the section it was supposed to be in, unless someone put it back. Standing up she wandered over the sciences section, and all the way down in the chemistry section hidden in the way back.

She looked through the row of books again. Diane let out a heavy sigh of exasperation. The one book she needed to finish this part of the assignment was nowhere in site. Still.

"And what are you heavily sighing about?" Billy asked, leaning backwards. He was balanced precariously on the chair, legs on the table to keep balance.

"The last book, Matter and Change, we need to finish this section of the assignment is gone. And I don't want to leave the library without finishing this part."

"Oh yeah that book, huh? Saw it in the front office."

"Really?" She asked, eyebrows flashing upwards into her hairline.

"Sure. That secretary or whatever had it."

She looked at him curiously, gauging to see if he was bullshitting. She couldn't tell. But why would he lie about a stupid chemistry book?

"Alright, I'll go get it then." She said.

Billy sauntered after her.

Why did he have to follow in the first place. Wasn't he busy with his lighter?

As they walked through the library she couldn't help but take notice of how eerily quiet it was. Looking around she couldn't see anyone

sitting around and studying anymore. They must've all gone home.

And why was it so dark in the library? Barely any of the lights were on.

Diane knocked on the office door, but when no one answered it she found an empty room with the lights off. Odd. Where was Mrs. Wentz and her colleague? She always stayed until closing hours. The library was practically her first home.

Billy flipped the switch and Diane proceeded to have a look for the missing chemistry book on the cluttered desk. The quicker she found it the quicker she could take notes the quicker she was done working with Billy for the day.

She began rummaging around the desk, careful to put everything back just as she had found it. "Are you sure you saw the book in here?"

"Yeah it's here somewhere." He drawled.

Oh, she shouldn't be doing this. It was wrong. But she didn't know where else the book could possibly be, and she really wanted that stupid book so she could go home. She opened the first drawer and began rummaging around it.

Billy lit a cigarette with complete disregard for respect or the laws that prevented him from smoking in the office.

Diane turned her head around.

"What are you doing?" She hissed.

Billy shrugged. "See, I figure if you were going to do break the rules, so would I."

She stilled. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Dobler. Did you wonder why the building is so dark? We're out after curfew. As it stands," he turned around in a lazy manner, "We're breaking and entering now."

Diane stared in disbelief. Then raised a finger. "No, no we are not. The time is only-" she looked down at her watch. "Oh no."

"Oh, yes." Billy replied with a shit-eating grin.

"You knew." She accused.

"You need more risk in your life, Dobler. I'm helping to make sure you don't turn into an old crone before you're twenty. Thank me." He exhaled smoke whimsically into the air. "Now you'll be able to tell your small-town grandchildren that one time you were in the *librarian* after hours."

They were past curfew. They weren't allowed in the building. Both of them had to get out now. Quickly Diane closed the drawer and started towards the door.

"I'm sorry Officer," Billy said under his breath as he acted out their capture, "You know how Dobler is. I couldn't control her."

"Oh shut up!" She whispered.

"Did you just tell me to shut up?" He raised his voice. Why was he raising his voice?!

"Hey! Who's there?" The security guard yelled.

Oh, no. Diane knew that voice. Joe Moore was going to take them down to the station as soon as he got a hold of them. She looked at Billy with dread. What if this got put on her permanent record? What if she got jailed? What if she was in jail for the rest of her life? No university would take her in then.

She would end up here forever. Maybe she could get a job in Joyce Beyers store of all conveniences and settle down in a small house somewhere with some boy from high school and spend her nights making meatloaf. The thought of staying here made her recoil instantly.

"We have to go." She said with urgency, grabbing the book and hurrying towards the door.

"Lead the way." He gestured to the hallway, not at all alarmed by the prospect of getting caught.

They walked hurriedly through the building. As Diane turned a corner she instantly back-pedalled, slamming into Billy's chest. She whirled around and pushed him back. "Get back, get back, get back!"

He threw her a look of annoyance but let her push him just around the corner.

"Did I just see someone? Show yourself!" Mr. Moore yelled, seeing shadows.

Looking frantically around for a place to hide she threw herself into a room, which turned out to be nothing bigger than a custodians closet.

Billy followed and closed the door. Unlike Diane's face twisted in dread, Billy seemed to be enjoying the situation, like the thrill of being caught was the greatest thing ever.

Diane dropped to the floor.

"If I had known all it would take to put you on your knees was a broom closet I would've done this days ago." He drawled.

"Just be quiet." She took the bobby pin out of her hair. Quickly, with a small Swiss army knife she began fiddling with the small lock on the doorknob.

"You can't hide." Mr. Moore said, walking down the hallway. He opened every door on the way down, inspecting it, coming closer and closer to the closet.

Diane kept holding up the two items jammed into the lock.

He stopped right outside where Diane and Billy hid.

"The hell?" Mr. Moore said as he rattled the doorknob again. On the other side they heard the jingling of keys. Then the doorknob moved again as he tried a new key to open the door with. Diane jumped, hitting Billy's knees and sending him backwards as Mr. Moore hit the door in aggravation.

Billy's hands flailed as he righted himself. A broom fell forwards and Diane lunged to get it before it made noise.

Both students froze as they saw the doorknob twist. They were going to get caught now. One tug and the door would open.

"Screw it." Mr. Moore muttered, releasing the doorhandles as he gave up instead of giving it a final tug.

As the security guard shuffled away Diane let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. Billy took the broom out of her hand and she threw him a grateful look. Soon the hallway turned silent. He leaned against it.

"Now why don't you tell me how a little bookworm like you knows how to pick locks?"

Diane tried to stand up but Billy took a step forwards, forcing her to lean against the door or be chest to chest with him.

"Diane?"

"It's none of your business."

A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes and he shrugged. "Alright, then." He reached behind her and swung the door open.

With an *oof* Diane fell backwards, the broom crashing with her. The was a split second of silence.

"I knew it! Show yourself!" Mr. Moore yelled as his footsteps broke from a shuffle into a run.

Diane stared up at Billy who shot her a smirk. She scrambled upwards. Billy gestured down the hallway, away from Mr. Moore. She didn't need to be told twice.

Breaking into a sprint Billy quickly overtook her and she followed after him without a second thought.

How could he even run in this form fitting jeans?



They looked really, really good on him.

She snapped her jaw shut in agitation. Here she was about to be caught and jailed for life over being in the library after-hours and she was admiring his toned thighs and well-sculpted butt.

*Get a grip, Diane.*

They burst through the doors and into the cool night air.

The parking lot was absolutely empty with the exception of Billy's car which they both quickly sprinted towards. Billy slid in.

Diane put a hand to her chest as she fought to catch her breath. Oh, exercise was never her strong suit.

Billy lowered the window. "You going to make me wait?"

"Get bent, Billy." She snapped as she righted herself. She tried to calm her breathing. "I'll walk home."

"Don't let the wolves eat you." He drawled, drawing up the window before roaring out the parking lot.

"Stop!" Mr. Moore yelled, his voice carrying across the parking lot.

Looking behind her, she saw him standing at the library's entrance and her eyes widened. Oh, that wasn't good.

Billy's car squealed around the bend and out of sight.

She sprinted out the lot, hoping Mr. Moore didn't give chase.

As she ran down the street she looked behind her, but saw no sign of the security guard.

Diane ran half the way home.

The full moon was high in the sky, lighting up the ground in gentle blue light.

As she saw her house down the road, hidden from the rest of Hawkins in the woods the hair on the back of her neck suddenly

raised and unease roiled in her stomach. She picked up her pace. She looks behind her, but saw nothing but the finely paved driveway.

The house was dark.

But that wasn't unusual.

As she got closer she broke into a full sprint, clutching her keys in her pockets. At the doorstep she fumbled with finding the right key and jammed it into the door, whipping her head around to see what was out there.

Quickly she entered and slammed the door shut and locked it.

But there had been nothing but darkness.

Her heart was beating against her ribcage as she leaned against the door.

It was the strangest feeling, like something had been watching her. Stalking her.

Diane breathed in deeply to calm herself. Hawkins had turned strange the past year but she was safe. Nothing was out there.

If she distracted herself she'd be calmer.

The stupid assignment provided the perfect distraction.

She wandered into the kitchen and got herself a cup of tea before going up to her room. "Hi Mom, Hi Dad." She called softly, knowing she'd get no answer.

Sitting down she tried to do the assignment, but her mind kept getting drawn by the Billy Hargrove.

Absent-mindedly she chewed on the end of the pencil, adding a new mismatched row of bite marks. She still had to work with him for two more weeks. Fighting him got her nowhere. With a sigh she got up and looked out the window into the dark forest.

Diane decided to try a new tactic: kindness.

### 3. Chapter Three: Not Alone

*Watched Stranger Things, wrote a story, uploaded two chapters. Promptly forgot about this. Was shocked by the amount of interest when I returned from the grave. Thank-you for all your reviews, I have loved reading every single one. What I'm trying to say is: I am back and ready to finish this story for you all. Something has to get me going until the release of Season 3 which is a day and forever away.*

*I should throw out a warning that there are mentions of child abuse and domestic abuse in this story, but nothing graphically violent. The M rating is \*not\* for violence.*

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This is it. This is the final day she had to forcibly spend with Billy Hargrove. After this they delivered the punishment assignment, and she was free. After that it was smooth sailing throughout the rest of her year. She could graduate and go to a good college at the opposite end of the country, far away from Hawkins.

As she waited on the football field after school hours her foot tapped the freshly mowed lawn with giddy impatience. The Twilight sky was a deep orange and maroon. Each puff of breath was illuminated under the football stadiums bright lights. She wrapped her arms tighter in an effort to conserve her body heat. Even throwing on a winter jacket wasn't enough with her grey cable knit sweater and ankle-length dark skirt.

Billy wasn't supposed to arrive for another half an hour, but Diane had ended up finishing her schoolwork earlier than expected at the library. This time she wasn't staying in the library past its open hours. She paced back and forth, hoping to pass the time somehow. If she had been smart she would've checked out a book before the library closed.

Someone came towards her. She was shocked if her accidental partner in crime came earlier than he said he would. Punctuality was the plight of the apathetic.

It wasn't Billy. She was shocked however, to see Steve walking

straight towards her. Just in case she looked behind her, but there was no one else.

"Hey Diane." He said, giving an awkward wave.

"Hey Steve?" It was as much of a question as reply. They had barely exchanged any words in years, and certainly weren't on friendly enough terms anymore to warrant an out-of-the-way greeting like this.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Haven't heard yet? I've been accused of plagiarism because of Billy Hargrove - that new kid - and now we need to work together on an assignment.

Steve looked intensely annoyed at this information. "No, I didn't hear . . . Been a bit, uh . . . Preoccupied. Jesus, what a total douchebag."

"There's nothing I can do about it now. Just one more night and I'm done working with him." She replied. "What are *you* doing out here?"

"Forgot something in my locker. Was getting back when I saw you out here. Far as I know you're not really the uh, cheerleading type, so couldn't really just ignore you, could I. You shouldn't be outside at night, but especially not by yourself."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Wow, coming back to school voluntarily. Nance really has changed you."

Steve got that look in his eye she loved seeing in relationships. Unfiltered love. Steve and Nancy was a relationship she hadn't seen coming, and yet, seeing them together it was simultaneously the least shocking thing. Life was weird. "Guess she has."

For a long drawn out moment the silence was comfortable as it was between old friends, before they came to the realisation at the same time that they weren't old friends. At least, not anymore. Awkwardness crept into the silence.

"Dee, you shouldn't be out here alone. Especially at night." He lamented, eyes flickering between hers in concern.

His newfound concern caused her to bristle. "I didn't realise we were friends again."

"Oh come on," His hand rose in exasperation. "Listen . . . I know that we don't hang out anymore, but I'm only trying to look out for you."

"Like you were back then?" She asked. He didn't look like he was going to give up this conversation. How did he have the nerve to suddenly start acting like he was concerned for her? "Steve what's really going on? Look I'm on school property and nothing ever happens in Hawkins, right?"

"I . . ." He ran a hand through his hair roughly and scanned the outskirts of the stadium, right where the lights stopped and the piercing darkness began. "Nothing ever happens here. You're right."

"I know."

"Just be careful anyway, there's been reports of weird animals around Hawkins." He said, not seeming to be in the mood to leave her alone any time soon. "Just don't do anything too exciting and you know - in the dark, or whatever."

"Thought me being boring is why we stopped being friends." Right around the Eighth grade when Carol, Steve, Tommy, Andie and Amy had begun experimenting with drinking and picked up smoking. If she had been caught doing anything she shouldn't, well, her parents probably weren't in the State anyway to help her out. She wasn't going to spend eternity in jail, withering away. In her avoidance of jail, she was ousted from the group.

"Didn't realise the royal King Steve was going to join us on our date." A voice called, making them both look sideways. Billy was here, hands stuffed in the pocket of his leather jacket zipped all the way up. With a red scarf thrown over his attire either he didn't feel the cold or had no proper clothes for this weather.

"He's not, and this isn't a date."

The boys locked eyes with each other and sized each other up and Steve joined them with his usual swagger. They stood only a foot

away from each other. A small, dangerous grin began forming on Billy's face. Then Steve looked behind him to Diane, conflict clear in his eyes. But he made a decision and threw her a look of caution. "Night Diane, take care of yourself. Just - take what I said into consideration."

"Evening Stevie-boy." Billy gave a half-mocking bow.

"Oh shut up." Steve sighed, moving out of his way and trudging back towards the parking lot on the other side of the school.

Billy looked Diane up and down like the clothes she was wearing were appealing. "And good evening to you too."

"Ready to f-"

"Finish the assignment?" He completed for her, already predicting her words.

"Yup."

"Well are you going to stare at me or tell me what we have to do?"

Of course he didn't read any part of the assignment. So far she had done most of it, after all. Adding the final part wasn't too much of a stretch. Instead of reciting the paragraph of instructions to him she opted for compressing it in an effort to keep his attention span. "We need to measure the area of the field, so we're taking the width and height of the field. If we're fast we can be done in ten minutes or less."

"We're waving around a tape measure?"

"Yeah, we have to measure the football field. Look," she pointed, "the bleachers are within the line."

They marched to the bleachers, and then behind them. The line went halfway under the bleachers before ending. The buzzing of the bleacher lights amplified the closer they got.

"So what did Hawkins High Golden Boy have to say?"

"I didn't know you cared about gossip."

"A town this boring can't have any good gossip. Most scandalous thing that happens around here is the crops wilting. I just wanted to know what got our King in a twist back there."

"Why are you so mean to Steve?" She asked. Sure Billy wasn't always pleasant to be around, but he had gathered quite a base from the basketball and football players and he didn't target them half as harshly as he targeted Steve, who avoided confrontation with him. The stadium light flickered.

"Sticking up for loverboy?"

She looked at the field. "We used to be friends."

Billy snorted.

"Before you start with a mean comment, don't." She said before walking over to the corner where she could start measuring the field. Even if he did, she wasn't going to engage with him. She was making it her mission to be diplomatic.

Billy's hair was slightly tousled and she had a sneaking suspicion the reason he had called to extend the time of their meeting was over some girl he had probably taken to the Lovers Lane.

He caught up with her quickly, slowing down his pace to keep with her shorter one. "How were you friends with Steve? You're better than him."

"I can't believe I'm above King Steve on your list." She teased.

"Hey underneath all those layers I bet you're a sight for sore eyes, Dobler."

"I don't think anyone wants to see underneath that." She replied.

Billy grinned. "Don't be so insecure, its unappealing."

"I'm not insecure. I just don't have time to deal with all this, you know, this High School stuff." She replied. "And I'm not trying to

attract you so what I say and wear doesn't matter."

He laughed softly. "So this is what you're all about. Diane Dobler, too mature for the rest of us. Too *good* for the rest of us. Got the whole world figured out before the rest of us even thought about it."

"You're one to talk about being too good for the rest of us; you walk around here like you own the place."

"At least I'm honest." He said.

"Are you?" Something about him had always struck her as fake. Not fake like the popular girls who had flashed off their Lacoste shirts before anyone else in Hawkins at even thought of buying them. Billy felt fake like . . . Like those sunglasses at Marty's Convenience Store downtown that gave the world a different tint.

"Well maybe I hide some of that honesty because people like you couldn't handle it."

"Being rude and honest aren't the same thing." She said, and a small smirk flashed on his lips. Not at her . . . But like she had misinterpreted what he had said so wrongly he was almost proud of it. Like he was in on some dark secret she wasn't and never would be.

"You're not as mature as you think you are, Dobler. I think you're afraid." Billy said.

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"There's a Halloween party this Friday. Some kids parent's are out of town. You wouldn't have any problem joining then would you, since you're not afraid."

"I don't have a costume." That was the end of that discussion.

He turned around. She had stopped too and didn't move when he was a foot away. He was a little over a head taller than her. He smelled of cigarettes, faded leather and a rich cologne infused into the jacket. Reaching out he rubbed a lock of her golden hair between his fingers. Billy's eyes glanced down to her lips. Her feet were rooted to the spot as he leaned forwards, breath warm against her ear. "You could



always go as a virgin."

He pulled back with a lop-sided grin. He knew? Was it really *that* obvious? Her face went a deep red of humiliation. "You jerk."

"Well hey I was just kidding, but I'll that as a yes." A wicked grin appeared on his face. Her face was flaming. "Don't worry, it doesn't show . . . much."

"Jerk." She repeated again, too mortified to think of anything else.

"You just going to stay frozen or we going to measure this field?" He asked, and immediately she began walking to the bleachers. She forced her feet to move forwards. They were not going to freeze in place ever again because of Billy Hargrove.

The white benches loomed over her as she entered beneath.

"I bet you've never even been behind the bleachers before." His voice was low, right behind her. She whipped around, and nearly collided with him.

"We're not in Commie country, Billy, we do personal space here." She took a large step backwards.

"I can't help it you find me so distracting Dobler; being born with looks like these is a curse sometimes. Not that you'd know anything about that."

She gave him a withering look. "Lets just get through tonight. And then we never have to talk again."

"You're right. Just another hour of focusing and we'll never be together again. Just wait a second."

Billy began fishing through his back-pocket of his jeans. He threw a pack of tissues at her and her fingers desperately grappled with catching them. After three haphazardly attempts that had the pack slipping further and further from her hands they hit the ground. Sighing she kneeled down and picked them up. "Why are you throwing these at me?"

"Figured you were going to tear up once we go our separate ways. Heard some girls even die from heartbreak."

Rolling her eyes she pocketed the tissues. "You are so full of yourself. Here, just take this measuring tape and go to the other side and tell me how far the edge is away from the bleacher in that corner, and I'll take the other corner."

With a heavy sigh laden with sarcastic despair he took the ruler from her. "So you know in advance, I never open the letters girls give to me. It's nothing personal, except it is."

Diane refused to dignify his comments with a response, knowing she was playing into whatever game he was playing. He would just have to do that alone. Soon his footsteps were becoming more distant as he trudged to his side of the field.

Taking the tape measurer to the edge of the field near the darkness she knelt down to place it at the white painted line. She finished up quickly, pocketing her notes.

Billy was taking his sweet time. He only got up from his crouch when she was a few steps away from him. But something in his body language changed so sharply she slowed down in caution. He was staring at something in the darkness.

"Is something wrong?" She asked, speaking quieter than she had intended.

He squinted and muttered, "What the hell is that?"

Looking around she took a moment longer to identify. There it was. Someone at the very edge of the forest. Was Steve still here - and lurking at the edge of the football field?

No. His movement was too jerky for that. Her hair stood on end before she could figure out why. "Billy, who is that?" She muttered, her voice dropping to just above a whisper.

"I'm not Superman, do I look like I have better sight than you?"

"Seriously, who is that?"

"You're asking a hell of a lot of questions you won't be getting any answers to."

"That's not . . ." She leaned forwards, not realising she was peering over Billy's shoulder, using her hands to balance herself on his arm, "That's not a person?"

It was a question of uncertainty that she was desperate for Billy to vehemently deny. That of course, it was a person. Because only people walked out in the woods. That was the rule of sanity.

At her words he leaned forwards too. "You lost or something?" He yelled.

She whacked him, before she even knew why. The thing went so still it looked frozen. Then it bounded forwards in two steps straight towards them and froze again, causing both of them to stand still as uncertainty was replaced with horror.

"That's not human. That's -" The words died in her throat. No, not human. Too thin, too tall, and too twisted. Billy took a large stumbling step towards the school, his eyes not leaving the creatures. The creature's dark mouth opened like flower petals. A grainy screech emitted from its mouth.

"Run. RUN!" Billy yelled.

Turning sharply around he began sprinting towards the school building. She followed after him, heart beating painfully hard against her ribcage. "No!" She wanted to scream at him, "The door's locked." But she was only enough to get gasping breaths of air into her lungs as she ran towards the building in desperation. Billy's faster pace began widening the gap between them.

She felt like she was running too slow, like she was in a nightmare and her feet were stuck in quicksand. The thudding run of the creatures paws became louder behind her as it was catching up.

Billy got to the door before she did and he yanked on it one, twice. He swore loudly, then whipped his head around to see Diane. His eyes widened and she knew it was right behind her. "Follow me!"

She didn't have to be told twice as he took off, skidding around the corner. They were at the Eastern most part, furthest away from the entrance. Blood roared in her eyes as she sprinted. There! There was a door slightest open, it seemed Billy had spotted that before she had because he had already narrowly adjusted his course to get closer to the door.

The door was propped open with a broom-handle, he yanked it open and held it open for her. "Go, go go!" He roared.

She didn't look behind her as she nearly collided with Billy as he shut the door. He swore rapidly beneath heavy pants as he fumbled with the lock. Her hand gripped his arm in fear as she got ready to yank him back, abandoning all hope at locking them in.

Then the lock click. He grunted as a thud rattled the door and she fell onto the ground as he stumbled backwards. She cried out on impact.

There was another loud thud, like the creature was throwing itself against the door. Then there was silence. Billy looked down at her, then at the end, then back at her and reached out his hand. She gripped it and he pulled her up swiftly.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the gymnasium's storage room.

"We need to go." He said, and then began dragging her along the room and into the gym. He stood still for a second, scanning the place and then speed-walked over to the exit. They wandered through the dark hallways. She never realised how creepy and unwelcoming the school became when it was abandoned.

The lights flickered on for a brief moment and they looked up. "Is someone here?" She whispered.

He didn't say anything. The lights flickered on and off, on and off. His eyes darted down the hallway. Then the lights went haywire. He swore under his breath, then gripped her tighter, almost unconsciously. "I saw its shadow there at the end."

He pushed her into the closest classroom and swung the door shut, careful not to slam it. They whipped around for somewhere to escape

to, but they were stuck. The windows had no opening. "Hide." He grunted, diving for the desk. The lights inside the classroom began flickering too. Diane dove in after him, pressing against him as they both curled up beneath the teacher's desk, contorting their bodies to be small as possible. A light shattered and glass sprinkled onto the ground. She covered her head with her arms and bowed into Billy. His arms slid around her as he buried his face into the crook of her neck. A shiver of terror ran up her spine.

This was death. This was it. It was bleak and hopeless and made breathing hard. Soon she wouldn't be breathing at all. Billy's fingers were digging into back, hard enough to bruise. But she didn't even register the pain as adrenaline pumped through her body, fuelling her desperate survival attempt.

A wailing shriek of frustration from the creature right outside the door caused her to bury her head deeper into her knees as she let out a small sob. They were going to die.

Then there was silence. The lights began flickering less after about a minute. Then they flickered once more. Darkness took over the room again. There was only their heavy, shallow breathing and the monotonous ticking off the clock above the door. For five minutes neither moved.

Billy began wrestling away from under the desk as Diane gripped him harshly, desperate to hold him there. "Let go of me. Diane get off. I think it's gone. Let me go look."

"No!" She hissed.

"I'm starting to get cramps." He protested. That still sounded more bearable than being murdered by a demon. In the end his strength won and she lost her grip on him.

She watched as he neared the door cautiously, her fingers pressed to the linoleum floor. Pressing himself against the wall his hand gripped the door-handle. Slowly he pulled down, and then inched the door open. Everything in her was hysterically demanding she scream at him to close the door and come back. He peaked out, and then put his whole head out, looking up and down the hallway.

Then he closed the door again, less gently before. He strode over to the window and peered out, looking left and right, and even up. But there was nothing. "The coast is clear. Whatever that was is gone."

She paused as she digested his words, then crawled out. Her muscles trembled every few seconds as the adrenaline continued pumping through her veins. They stared at each other. Billy's eyes were bright and the rise and fall of his chest was shallow. The artery on his neck beat furiously. He ran his hands through his hair. Sweat caused the unruly strands near his face to stick to his skin.

"W-we need to go to the police - tell them what happened - oh my God - we need too-" Her breath was coming in uneven bursts. "What the fuck was that thing?"

"A lot of things happened tonight, but most shocking was that Diane Dobler just swore." He sounded distant.

She looked up at him. "How can you be joking right now?"

At the terror in her eyes his expression softened. "Diane, the police don't listen. They never do."

Her brows knitted together and she swallowed hard. She shook her head in disbelief. "No, they do. They always listen, that's their job. They'll understand. I-I mean even if they don't, they'll try to."

Something flashed in his eyes, something dark and volatile. "Trust me," his voice had gained a hard edge, "they don't."

Then he turned around and yanked the door open, striding out. She rushed after him. "Billy, wait."

But she had no choice but not follow him as he stalked the schools empty hallways. His head whipped back and forth at every junction they passed, but he ever slowed his pace. Soon she realised he was navigating to the front of the building where he'd have parked his car.

At the front entrance's door she grabbed his arm. "Wait. We don't know if that thing is out there."

"It's not." He said confidently.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Didn't you see the flickering lights? The closer it is the crazier the electricity goes."

Now that he said it, she did see the connection. But she was blown away by how fast he had put those two factors together. Diane was still processing the demon creature that made her want to curl up in fear. If not for Billy she didn't know if she'd ever have connected the lights to the proximity of the creature.

He opened the front door after unlocking it. "Don't make me carry you to the car."

"I-I'm coming."

They headed quickly towards the car, not quite running but not quite walking either. The second she was in the car he was racing out of the school lot and she had never felt gladder to leave the premise.

The engine roared as they sat silently. She didn't know where they were going, and her mind was too scattered for her to ask. Billy lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. He inhaled sharply and held the smoke for a long time, then exhaled roughly and shook his head.

Halfway through his cigarette he glanced at her. "Listen, I can't go home like this."

"W-what?"

"Like this." He waved at himself. "You got blood on my jacket. Know what kinda question's that'll raise? The ones you don't want answers too."

Diane looked down at her hand. She could see the blood now on her palm. The pain was beginning to settle in, slowly but surely. It must've happened when she fell. "Oh. Right. Okay, we can go to my place."

Diane felt like she was in a dream and was going to wake up soon.

Everything around her felt like it was floating and that she was living in a world delayed by five seconds. She directed him to her house on the other end of town, voice distant as she looked outside into the darkness. But all she could see was her own haunted reflection, and next to her, Billy furiously smoking through his third cigarette.

They arrived outside. The living room light was on. "Your parents awake?" He asked, staring up at the sprawling house that towered over the two of them..

She trudged up to the porch, Billy taking the steps two at a time. She inserted the key into the door. "They're not home."

He shut the door behind him and looked around curiously as she turned on the light. "Where are they?"

She lead them into the kitchen. As he eased himself into the mahogany chair he let out an impressed whistle. "You're loaded. Look at this mansion."

"You talking all the time kept interrupting the bragging I always planned on doing." She answered as she put a beer on the table. She opened it and took a sip, nose wrinkling at the taste. She pushed it towards him, uninterested in the beverage.

He eyed it, then grabbed it and chugged half the bottle. After wiping his lips on the back of his hand he took out the pack of cigarettes and placed them on the table. He lit his fifth one since they got in the car.

She pointed at the cigarette. "Can I take it?"

Billy threw her a skeptical look but then handed her the cigarette. Billy shrugged out of his jacket, throwing it on the table. She held the cigarette between her fingers like she saw everyone else do and then held it to her lips. She inhaled and immediately began hacking, handing it back to him. Her lungs burned.

With an amused snort he took it back and took another puff.

Once her throat cleared she spoke again. "So now what?"

"Not what? Nothing, that's what."



"But-"

"Now I wash my jacket. Then I go home. That's all." He got up and dragged his jacket with him. She watched with unseeing eyes as he scrubbed his jacket sleeve under the running water. After a string of muttered curses he began scrubbing harder. He wasn't talking about what had happened and she couldn't form the words without her throat closing up with fear.

"Billy," she got up and took a hold of the jacket, "Let me."

His eyes were wild with frustration which was amplified from the horror of the demon creature. "Fine, just get it off." He snapped.

Taking soap she lathered it in between her hands before setting to work on the jacket. It was a fairly large smear, but she was sure she could get it out.

She sighed, but before she could speak Billy started to talk. "We don't know what we saw."

The blood was coming off now, slowly but surely. Her voice was small. "What - what if it comes back?"

"We deal with it then." His answers were breezy, like it was a minor inconvenience and not a horrifying creature that had tried to murder them.

"What if it comes back here?" The thought of being alone in the house with the thing prowling around Hawkins had her palms growing clammy again.

"It won't come into your house and it won't know if you're here when you're upstairs. Just keep the doors locked." He jammed the bud into the previously clean ashtray on the table. "When are your parents coming back?"

She dried his jacket and handed it back to him. "It wont dry for a few hours, but at least its clean now."

His eyes narrowed for a second, acutely aware she was being evasive where her parents were concerned. But like he kept telling her, he

didn't care about her. So he wasn't going to press for answers. And they were done with the group project.

Right. She closed her eyes. The project. Pulling the notepad out of her pocket she slid it over to him. "Here, write down the measurement and I'll just finish the project."

"I can't."

"Don't worry about it. I'll just do both our parts and turn it in. You'll get full credit."

"Listen, Dobler. I don't have the number. Got a little distracted, you know?" He shrugged on the jacket.

She rubbed her eyes. "I'll make up a number."

"Drinking alcohol, trying cigarettes, faking numbers all in one night? I'm startin' to think I'm a bad influence on you."

"And you saved me. What does that say about you?"

Suddenly she was cornered as he placed both hands on either side of her on the table. Her chest nearly brushed his. His brows flashed up as he said, "That maybe you got me wrong."

In their proximity she felt breathless as she stared up at him. The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them, "Maybe you could stay over, just for tonight? N- not like that. There's a couch. But you can also-"

"Dobler," he murmured, looking at her lips and letting his gaze linger before travelling up to meet her eyes again, "At least buy me dinner first."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

"I have my step-sister to look after." He said, before leaving. It was the first personal thing he had told her. Even though she knew he did have a sister in the middle school as a fact. But she didn't know they didn't share the same parents. She watched as his car left her driveway, plunging it back into darkness as he turned the corner.

She checked the lock twice just to make sure it was definitely locked.

As she curled up into bed she stared at the wall with posters of art her parents had collected from their usual trips all over the States. Sleep wasn't going to come easy, if at all. What the hell was that? And did Steve already know about it?

## 4. Chapter Four: The Party Invite

"Woah what happened to you?" Lucas asked,

"Yeah what happened, Diane?" Mike asked.

She looked down at the her bandaged hand. For a moment she was transported to sprinting across the football field, hearing the creatures thuds behind her. Then she was snapped back into reality, right there in the middle of the school parking lot at high noon. She looked up at the boys and forced a smile on her face. Shrugging, she said, "Messed with a knife, cooking is harder than it looks. That's why TV Dinners are a thing."

"Looks brutal. Did it hurt?" Mike asked, unable to contain himself as he came closer to look.

"You bet it did." Then she honed in Dustin. "So, did you have a good time babysitting yourself?"

His eyes widened. Right. He had hoped she would've forgotten that. Two days ago was forever ago. "Uh - uh, yeah, I did. It was great. I think I've learnt a lot."

She bent down to be eye-level with him. "Oh, yeah?" She whispered.

He cracked. "Okay I'm sorry, geeze, don't kill me. I'm really sorry Diane. I can't explain it but I had to do it." He looked at Lucas and Mike like they were going to back him up. Both of them had jumped ship the second she had narrowed her eyes at their friend.

She let out a long exhale in mocking contemplation of how she was going to handle this situation.

"Aw Diane, come on," He begged, "Please tell me you forgive me. I'll ever thrown in -"

"Do *not* say your pearly whites."

His hands flew up in surrender. "I was going to say a whole bag of Razzles."

Crossing her arms she pretended to look deep in thought. Dustin had his hands clutched together as he stared at her pleadingly. Both Mike and Lucas looked wary of the outcome. "Fine." She sighed dramatically. "I have considered it."

"So we're good now?" Dustin asked.

Diane held up a finger to caution him. "Yeah . . . Maybe I have forgiven you. Or maybe I'll be your worst nightmare next time." She whispered. Then smiled. "Bye guys. Dustin, I'll see you guys the next time I babysit."

"I will totally be there. And I will be opening the door. And letting you in. To babysit. Because that's what you do."

"You're damn right I do." Then she gave them a wave and turned around. Dustin let out the breath he had been holding.

"Dude you are in so much trouble." Lucas said as she walked away. She smiled.

As she walked away she began absently-mindedly rubbing at the corners of the bandage.

Inside the high school she trailed the hallways to her locker, feeling increasingly like she was floating besides her body. Her hands spun the lock around to the right combination, but they remained on the lock as she stared at nothing in particular.

She jumped violently and hit a locker. She placed a hand on her heart in an effort to calm it. "Jesus Steve you can't just sneak up on people like that!"

He looked around. "Dee, we're in a crowded hallway. That's the opposite of sneaking up someone. Are you okay?"

"Yep." She said a little too quickly.

But Steve didn't seem to be buying it. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

She shook her head. "Sorry, just in my own head."

He pointed at the cut on her hand. "What happened?"

"Oh," she looked down at her bandaged hand again, but was relieved that the bandaging was still white, "I tripped."

"Thought it involved a knife."

So he had been talking with the Dustin and Co. Diane was saved from having to explain the conflicting answers.

"Hey Diane, hey Steve." Nancy smiled at the both of them, holding her books close to her chest.

Steve wrapped her up in his arms and spun her around. She laughed and whacked him on the shoulder, then looked at his dark glasses. "Take those stupid things off."

"I missed you." He said, pulling her close.

Diane went back to getting her books out while they went full couple. Her locker, like everything else, was perfectly clean and organised. She felt someone tap on her shoulder and look up to see Nancy had broken away from Steve and was holding out an orange piece of paper. Steve looked at his girlfriend in surprise at her spontaneous token of friendship, but quickly recovered.

She took it. *Tina's Halloween Bash. Come and get sheetfaced.* She snorted. "What's this?"

"Are you Halloween-blind, it says right there." Steve tapped on the paper, and Nancy shot him a warning look.

"Candy corn vision is a real thing, Steve." She took the paper and looked at the back, but it was empty. "I'm just surprised Tina is holding a party. Aren't her parents crazy strict?"

Nancy nodded. "Her parents are out of town for the week. But some of the others convinced her to hold the party there. Everyone promises to keep it clean."

"That house is going to look worse than the Staten Island garbage dump the morning after." Diane remarked.

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Nancy said.

A pregnant pause ensued as Diane shifted on her feet uncertainly.

"Do you want to join us?" Nancy asked.

Nancy was nice, she always was. But they weren't quite close friends. Sure they had had some hangouts together, but this was surprising. She had a feeling that deep down, Nancy was doing this for more selfish reasons. Maybe not purposely, but people didn't go out of their way for others for no reason. At least, that's what Diane believed.

"We'll be there. Jonathon will too." Nancy offered, as if the two loners were just going to band together on the mutual desperation for friendship over the years. "We can pick you up on the way."

Nancy was hard not to like. Even if her desires deep down were suspect.

"I'll consider it, but I don't have time to buy a costume." Diane said.

Steve looked at her in disbelief. "Yeah with your house there's no way that you don't have a costume or ten."

Diane shrugged. "You know what, I'm sure I'll find something."

Nancy grinned and then looked at Steve. "Great, so we'll pick you up at -"

"Eight?" Steve suggested as Nancy looked at him.

"Well I'll be there." Diane said with a smile and small wave of the poster.

Steve wrapped an arm around Nancy's waist and flashed her a grin, "See ya then."

Diane shook her head, proceeding to get her final book from her locker. Nancy inviting her to Tina's Halloween party wasn't even the strangest thing that had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

She grabbed her final book, and wrapped her arms around them. She

was exhausted, but there was only two more classes to get through before she could go home and curl up in bed.

"Morning, Diane." Billy was leaning against the lockers, making her jump in fright at his sudden proximity. She really was in her own head today.

"Morning." She glanced at him warily.

He took a step closer, looking down at her.

It was that look in his eyes again, like the one he set on all the girls he came across to charm them with the finesse of a snake-charmer. Maybe he thought after last night she was going to be willing to let him jump into her pants. She had invited him to stay the night, but hadn't she also made it clear it was because she had been freaked out? It had been silly to ask him to stay, he wasn't the type to just stay over for the sake of platonic comfort. "What do you want?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "No need to be like that, I just want to know how you're doing."

"No. You don't. You only talk with me when you want to get me to do something for you, or if you see Steve's been here." She slammed the locker shut. "Why do you care so much about him anyway? Want to know what his favourite color is and what flowers to get him so you can buy him a Valentines gift?"

His expression soured. "I'm waiting for Andie. Her locker is right next to yours, in case you weren't aware. Figure I'd make small talk with you, since you know," his voice dipped to a whisper as he leaned in, "I saved your life and all."

Using her shoulder she pushed off against the lockers with a frown. "I know. And thank you. But you don't have to look at me like that."

His fingers ghosted the underside of his jaw. "Like that?"

"Am I interrupting something?" A toxically sweet voice sounded right next to Diane. It was Andie.

"Nope." Diane said.



Andie eyed her. "Yeah, so, you're done with that project right?"

Diane nodded.

This suspicion in Andie's eyes increased. "Any reason you're still standing here?"

"My locker is here."

Andie gave a sharp laugh. "You know what I mean."

By the small smirk on his face Billy was thoroughly enjoying this conversation. Diane felt a headache coming on. The last thing she needed was for the most arrogant guy she knew going home with a falsely inflated ego. She wanted to lament that no, this was not a girl fight over him. He might've been from California. But he wasn't that special.

"To answer you question: if you feel so threatened by even me maybe you shouldn't be focusing on us girls. Maybe the guy you're trying to keep is the problem." The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. Maybe she still had some sort of residue energy from last night that blocked the filter between her mouth and brain.

If looks could kill Andie's would've had her six feet in the ground. "What's your damage?"

"Well, you're blocking my way, and I just want to get the class." She said.

"A word of advice, *Diane*, if you want to talk with a guy so badly, you don't have to steal their work. It's sort of pathetic." Andie hissed. "So, we're clear where we stand now, aren't we?"

But Diane wasn't going to be a doormat. She looked Andie right evenly. "Jock isn't my type anyway."

Then she brushed past the two of them. Billy turned his head, catching her walk down the hallway.

With two of the Junior calls watching the interaction Andie needed to act quickly, so she placed her hand on her flings chest to capture

his attention again.

## 5. Chapter Five: Booze Off

The weather was gradually growing colder. Winter was her least favourite season. Everything was icy and unwelcoming and the silence weighed down on her in the isolation. The radio was always turned on, and the batteries were carefully nestled in the drawer in preparation for when the radio died out.

The floor thudded with each hop as she struggled to get into the skirt. Sure they were a few years old but man, were they way tighter than she remembered. With a huff she looked down, smoothing out the skirt. The shirt was seamlessly tucked in. Turning around she looked at herself in the mirror. The pink skirt that was a little too tight and contoured her from waist to below the knees . . . The pink shirt . . . The tan boots . . . It was as close as she going to get to Claire in the Breakfast Club.

The phone rang, and she perked up. Quickly she went to grab the landline in the kitchen. "Diane Dobler, who's calling?"

"Hello darling." Her mom's voice answered, coming through the static. Despite herself she felt an energy sweep through her body.

"You're still coming back home tomorrow, right?" She asked, cursing herself for how hopeful her voice sounded. How childish. They had been gone for three weeks now, longer than usual. Her parents weren't known for their physical affection, but all she wanted was to be cuddled up with her mom next to the fireplace. They didn't even need to talk.

There was a long pause and Diane strained to hear against the static, careful not to miss any of their words. "Our trip has been extended. But that's not why we're calling."

She laughed without humour. Of course they weren't even going to tell her they had extended their trip. And of course they weren't calling just to check up on her. "Why bother calling, then? To make sure the house hasn't burned down?"

"Diane, this is your father speaking. We received a call from the

school. They told us what happened. What happened with our agreement that you'd stay out of trouble and do your work?"

She froze at their words, but quickly regained her voice. The excitement had quickly died down, to be replaced with a biting cold. She wasn't going to tell her parents that the plagiarism wasn't even her fault. Her parents always told her that it didn't matter who had started what, if she was indicted in something, it would always be viewed as her fault. "It was an accident. I - I didn't mean for any of that to happen. It won't happen again. Did you . . . Did you just call because you're angry and wanted to yell at me?"

"No," her mom wrestled to be a part of the conversation too, "We're just so disappointed with you. We raised you better than that."

She swallowed hard. The disappointment was biting. Of course they hadn't called her to check up on her, just to see how she was doing. "I think you and I have different definitions of what raising a child means."

"Don't give your mother lip." Her father scolded. "Diane, we have given you everything, and you to thank us by throwing it back in our face?"

Her hand tightened around telephone cord. "Maybe this doesn't revolve around you. I don't just do everything with you in mind."

There was a long silence and she looked down at the floor. "Adjust your attitude. Now."

"Sorry." She said through clenched teeth. There was never room for argument, she had learned that a long time ago.

There was another long, heavy sigh. "If you present yourself as such a reckless liability, you won't be admitted to work for the Department of Energy."

He was speaking specifically of the research base they worked for just on the outskirts of Hawkins. They produced something boring and bland that involved lots of papers, but somehow involved endless travel.

"Maybe I don't want to work for our stupid government if it involves never being home."

Her fathers voice had turned cool. "We'll call you back soon, in the mean time I fully expect you to stay out of trouble and never to use that attitude with me again. It's deeply disrespectful Diane, and we don't talk that way in this family."

He hung up before she could reply. The beep was monotonous and unending. She placed the handle back with a little more force than was necessarily. Before she had to be stuck with her thoughts too long there was the honk from Steve's car outside. Hastily she grabbed her purse and keys. Maybe this stupid party was exactly what she needed.

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The car ride had a slightly awkward air in it. Steve and Nancy was talking, but Nancy kept roping her into conversations that she absently participated in. Her leg bounced furiously in the back seat as she stared outside at the darkening tree line, but the negative storm inside of her wasn't dying down. She should be grateful. She should always and only just be *grateful*.

She exited the car with a little more haste than she had anticipated. But its not like she knew anyone at the party, or cared much for any introductions. It wasn't going to end up with having friends. Toilet paper had been thrown around the house and came down like party streamers. Graffiti from permanent markers had been scribbled into various surfaces. Tina's parents were going to kill her when they got home.

Making her beeline for the alcohol she saw in the kitchen she hastily poured herself a cup and drank until she saw the bottom of the cup again. Already she was refilling her cup. The punch tasted bitter, and she was sure it was more alcohol than fruit punch. Good.

"So, want to talk?" Steve ventured, appearing besides her. Nancy had found some friends and they were in enthusiastic talks. "You know, since I did drove you here."

For a moment she thought of rejecting it. But she went through with

it anyway. She let him lead the way until they found a quiet room, which happened to be the bathroom. Considering the rest of the party it was surprisingly clean.

As the door muted the party she found she didn't know what to say. Small talk was awkward, but she didn't really have anything to say about the past.

"Is it too late to say sorry?"

"No?"

He laughed. "So Tommy's kind of a dick."

"He really is." But she only stuck to agreeing with him.

"Amy and Andie are pretty bitchy, too."

"How'd you figure all that out, Sherlock?"

The smile faded and he shrugged. "Around the time they spray painted all that shit about Nance everywhere."

Right, it had been everywhere. People still thought Nancy was a cheating whore. There were several embellished rumours going around on the topic. Especially because they got to combine it with the 'loner kid' and his 'freaky little brother'.

It hadn't been Steve as the instigator to kick her out. Amy had been the main instigator, with Andie and the others either joining or being apathetic too it. Steve had been apathetic to the whole thing. That had somehow hurt worse than if he had just honestly barred her from being a part of their group.

Not that she was too upset she wasn't part of their group anymore. Being on the outside looking in she was constantly reminded of how different they were. Steve had realised that too, just years later.

"Why now?" It wasn't a judgemental question, though it ought to have been. She was simply curious.

He didn't seem to have a definitive answer himself. "I've been

beginning to see things in a different way than I used to. Didn't really pay attention for years where you were. But you're sort of by yourself all the time, and you didn't used to be."

"Steve." She looked up at him. "I choose to be alone."

"No, I know." He replied quickly. "I'm not trying to pity you. Not that I don't. But not like that that. I mean. What I mean is, being friends again wouldn't be too bad, would it?"

"Being friends with the loner? Steve Harrington are you feeling alright? "

That earned her a light punch in the shoulder.

"I know making fun of you when you didn't want to join us was a dick move, but . . . friends, again? Promise I won't ditch you again." He said, holding out his pinky.

She laughed. They hadn't done pinky promises since elementary school. But when they did, it meant serious business. It was so childish and innocent she couldn't help but find a renewed warmth towards Steve. She held out her pinky, and linked it with his. "Friends."

He smiled widely, fully aware of how silly they must look with their pinkies linked like kids. Whatever had happened to Steve in the past few months, she liked him a whole lot better now. Being nice suited him.

She raised her glass "To me finally getting around to drinking."

"That's a crap toast."

"You got a better one?"

He raised his glass and bumped it against her. "To finally joining the cool kid."

They drained their cups. For a moment they looked at each other and smiled, finding a brief serenity in having patched things up. Not that she fully trusted him to keep that going, but she was getting tipsy so

that didn't matter, anyway.

Finally he stood up and she mimicked him. "Back to the party?"

"Back to the party." She confirmed. First he exited and she followed him into the hallway. But the hallway was crowded with a few faces she wasn't interested in seeing, and judging by Steve's expression, neither was he.

"Old friends, huh?" Billy asked, slamming his palm against the wall and forcing Steve to confront him. He eyed Steve up and down, mockingly sizing him up. "Hell, I'd said you're more than that."

"Mind your own business." Steve glowered at him.

Billy was soaked in beer that was combatting the smell of sweat and ashtray; it was overwhelming and Diane took a step back.

"Mind my own business like your girlfriend's minding her own? She bolted the second she could get away from you, Stevie. Must suck to realise her boyfriend's the little bitch in the relationship."

"Oh, bite me." Steve snapped back at him. There was a sound of mocking surprise from Tommy, who had attached himself to Billy like he was leached to Steve the year before. Now Diane knew Nancy was smart by leaving elsewhere, because the amount of stupidity filling the hallway was smothering. The gorilla beating his chest with his two monkey lackeys howling behind him.

While she felt bad for Steve, she also knew he could handle himself. This game was just about who could be the douchiest. Too bad Billy didn't realise Steve had already quit the game.

Billy ignored Steve for a moment and looked raked over Diane's form and she shifted on her feet, acutely aware the clothes she wore were much more form-revealing than usual. "Nice to see you took my costume recommendation seriously." He said.

"You're wasting your time." Tommy sneered at her. "Dobler ain't nothing but a stick in the mud."

"Why don't you piss off, Tommy? 'Stead of being Hargrove's lapdog."



Steve stood up for her, looking over Billy's still extended arm at his former friend.

"You always go for the losers, don't you? Easier to get into their panties I bet." Tommy said with a wide grin, eyeing Diane up and down like she was a piece of meat. Diane narrowed her eyes.

"You've always been disgusting." She snapped at him, crossing her arms. And full of bullshit. Back when they had been friends, she knew Tommy had had a crush on her for years. Funny how easy he turned when she went her own way. Having enough she pushed past all of them, daring Billy to block her way too.

With everyone's level of drunkenness at the party they barely noticed Billy's confrontation, but it probably wasn't the first one he had had tonight. He seemed out for blood, and she was betting there were a bunch of people who were triggering him in one form or another.

Getting through the wave of people was like trying to fight against the current. But she knew there were more drinks in the kitchen. And as the alcohol already in her system began making her feel fuzzy she decided she wanted more. Just then Billy appeared in front of her, but he had probably viciously shoved his way forwards without regard, instead of her polite and unnoticeable manoeuvring.

"Running away so fast?" He asked, and while his voice was surprisingly level, she heard him over the booming music.

"Didn't think you were interested in talking to me." She gave him a pointed look.

"Well, I got a moment to spare." He said, and for a moment she wasn't even sure if he himself was believing his own words, like some god who knew the mere mortals around him would be grateful for the chance to socialise with him. And then the alcohol she had been drinking, a little too fast, since she had arrived hit her full force. Everything turned into one big blob of colours. And every emotion she had previously just tried to get rid of came rushing back to the surface with the intensity of a broken dam. Mom and Dad were certain to be disappointed by how she was acting now.

"I get it. You hate having to leave California, you hate that you have to be in the Middle of Nowhere Indiana, you hate having to get blown in the backseat of your car in a field by some Hawkins girl. You hate all of it." She could hear her own increasingly slurring speech, but she couldn't stop the words from spilling out. "But guess what, Billy? We all have things we wish we could *change* but you know what? You can't. Not all of us just can. We don' - we don't all go and get angry at the world. So we just make do with what we have."

She chugged the rest of the sickly sweet drink. It was nice now, she couldn't taste the bitter liquor anymore. She should fine another one. "So, bye." She told him and bumped into him as her orientation began twisting. Getting away from him was her best option after those comments; she had already seen the way his face twisted at the accusations.

But he gripped her arm and she looked up at him. His expression was calculating, like he was trying to figure her out. His own words were filled with disbelief and frustration. "So what, you're bothered because you think I'm trying too hard?"

She didn't know why he was even pursuing this conversation. Because he didn't care. For a brief moment the crowded party around them slipped away. "I don't think you're trying at all. I think when you had to move here you just gave up."

The music rattled her bones and she jerked out of his grip, stumbling towards the kitchen where the punch was. Someone had refilled it to its brim. As she took a large sip she pondered why she was even here at all. This was Billy's world, filled with too much booze, cigarette smoke that choked her lungs and made her eyes water, and a whole host of people just looking for the next story to gossip about in the sober mornings of school. It wasn't hers.

Nancy came storming out from the hallway, red punch spilled down the front of her shirt. That's when she realised she hadn't seen Steve in a while. In fact, he wasn't anywhere. Something had shifted in the past few months since he had begun hanging around Nancy and knew he hadn't found a new social circle since. If she couldn't see him, then it was only logical that he had gone home.

Had he seriously just left her stranded at the party? Well fuck you too, Steve Harrington. Friends forever, huh. But after a moment concern began to knot in her stomach. Steve was a lot of things, but he was also responsible, and he wouldn't have purposefully just left without inviting her to be driven back home by him. Judging by Nancy's glazed eyes upset face and disheveled appearance they had gotten into a huge fight.

One strong enough to cloud his judgement, because he was much more sober than her and Nancy. Despite the jerk move he had pulled leaving her here, she couldn't help but worry about him. But she suspected his emotional state was somehow linked to Barb as well. Ever since she ran away both Nancy and Steve had been on edge, somehow.

She saw Andie and Billy together, close together. A creeping smile appeared on both of their faces and Billy glanced her way, while Andie eyed her up and down before refocusing back on Billy. There was a cold triumph in Andie's eyes. Whatever it was, it was clear she was involved in their conversational topic, but Diane was less than interested to know what it regarded. With a roll of her eyes she turned away to fill up her cup with the red liquor. Then Jonathon found Nancy and whisked her away.

She was going to ask him if he could take her home too, but he was moving fast and she got distracted by someone yelling something across the room. When she looked back, he was gone. Damn. Really, damn. Of course she had been left behind. Alone, as usual. She set down the now empty cup, and began walking towards the front lawn as she thought hard on how to get back home. Goosebumps rippled across her exposed skin. Bringing a winter jacket to the party would've been smart right about now, but she had assumed she'd be riding back home in a warm car.

Crossing her arms she rubbed her arms to keep warm as she harshly blinked to rid herself of the double-vision. It was there to say.

"Hey." Hot breath tickled her ear, and she turned around. For a moment she didn't recognise who was beneath the fake moustache and Hawaiian shirt. Oh, it was that kid that was a year above her.

"Oh . . . Simon." She faltered.

He grinned and took a step closer to her. "Nice outfit."

As she looked down at her clothes she stumbled slightly and he caught her, hands going around her upper arms. "Woah, hey, I got you."

She looked up at him. Before she could say anything he had surged forwards, pressing his lips harshly to hers. His lips were wet and slippery and all over the place. She gripped his shirt in alarm. "Get - get off me."

But he pulled her tighter towards him, hands roaming all over the place and clutching her at odd angles. Diane needed to get out of here. She didn't want this. Everything felt wrong with Simon and she couldn't even remember how they had gotten here in the first place. Didn't Billy have a car? Oh yeah, of course he did. A fast one. One that could take her home. That was all she needed. Billy sounded like a great idea? Right. Yes. Better than this one. A lot better. If he didn't accept, she'd bribe him with money. Her parents wouldn't notice anyway.

But the world was spinning faster than the spin cycle of the washing machine. "Get. Off." She slurred out. His breath was too hot against her skin, his hands sliding down to her hips felt unwelcome and intrusive. But she was missing concentration, and her body was rebelling against her in vengeance from the alcohol she had flooded into her bloodstream.

There was a small tussle between them that threw her off balance and onto the ground with a thud. She looked up to see the hazy blur of Billy shoving Simon away. He was yelling something, but his words weren't translating to her. Then he gripped the front of Simons costume and shook him hard, face nearly pressing against the other boys.

She hated violence and fought against the nausea to stumble upwards. Billy drew his fist back and she leapt forwards, gripping onto his outstretched limb and using it for leverage as her balance was thrown out. "Billy, don't. Please."

He whipped his head around to stare down at her. His eyes were bright and wild, face tinged red with anger. "Get the hell off me, Dobler."

He shook his arm. A crowd had begun gathering. "I don't have a ride home. I need to get home."

Her pleas were losing against a wave of growing *beat him, beat him, beat him* chants that were rising in chorus from the gathering boys. Their fists pumped in the air. Blood was already trickling out of Simon's nose as he panted hard, glaring at Billy with eyes as wild as the other boy.

"Beat it." Billy snapped at her, not taking his eyes off of Simon.

"Fine, I'll walk back." She muttered, disengaging herself from her plagiarism partner. She didn't think he heard her as she began fighting against the ring of boys. It was chests and elbows and the stink of sweat and booze all the way through.

Billy threw out a wild laugh and gripped Simon by his jacket again, pulling him so close their beer-fused breaths mingled. "You're a fucking loser, Hawthorne." Then he sent the boy sprawling onto the grass. The ring erupted into ferocious cheers, and egged on by the others began throwing their drinks and red cups at Simon, who had begun curling up into a ball, heads thrown over his head for protection. Most of them had gathered later and didn't even understand why Billy had targeted Simon. They didn't care.

Readjusting his jacket, Billy made his way out of the crowd, but they parted for him with roars of pride. He knocked into someone and didn't even care enough to turn around and figure out who. Diane turned the corner and he walked a little faster. His hand played with the keys in his pocket absent-mindedly as he made his way towards the blue Camaro parked outside on the street, far away from everyone else. If she got eaten by a nuclear-infused dog then police would probably end up at his place since they had spent so much time together recently. And their entire household was well aware of what happened to little Billy after law enforcement perused their premise.

It was really fucking cold. Fucking Indiana weather, it was abysmal. He started the car up with ease, making a quick U-turn, speeding up down the road to catch up with Diane. Reaching over he began rolling down the window, swerving along the road as he did so. He stopped right before her.

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*I realise there might be small discrepancies in my story. I know, I had one job. And I'm shifting time a little bit to fit with this story . . . but hey, Stranger Things have happened (this joke was bad in my head and it was bad writing it but I had already committed). The reason I've chosen to stretch out the timeline of the events in the show is so I can run parallel and weave Billy and Diane's characters and plotline into the central story of Season 2 better. I've done the same thing for 80's pop culture references: The Breakfast Club was released in 1985, and Stranger Things is set in '83 and '84.*

*If anyone wants to talk S3 theories or characters shoot me a message.*

## 6. Chapter Six: It Takes Two to Tango

DIANE

"Get in." He ordered. But she crossed her arms tighter and walked faster, like she was going to out-walk his Camero. "You know how this goes, right? Get in or I'll throw you in."

After staring at him with suspicious for a moment she stumbled, righted herself, and made her way to his car. Why did he always have to be such a jerk and force himself to gain the upper-hand, instead of just asking like a normal human. Maybe he was trying to avoid rejection by not having it be a card on the table at all. As she tried crawling in through the open window Billy looked at her. "Christ, why have you been drinking like tonight was the last time you'd ever get a drop of booze?"

He got out of his seat, not bothering to slam his door shut. In the early hours of the morning Hawkins was dead. Sliding his hand around the petite girls waist he opened the door and wrestled her in. Just as he was about to shut the door he paused, then leaned in, reaching over her and putting on the seatbelt. "Thanks." She muttered.

Billy said nothing, getting into his side and slamming his door shut, peeling down the road. The smell of burnt rubber filled the car. "You're an idiot."

"Takes one to know one."

He seemed about to throw her a scathing remark at her childish antics, but instead shook his head harshly and lit a cigarette.

She looked down between their seats. "I-I'm sorry. I just wanted to forget. I think. I don't . . . remember what I wanted anymore."

"Cheers to forgetting." He muttered.

"Aren't you drunk? We shouldn't be driving. You shouldn't be driving." She said.

He snorted. "That water beer back there? Haven't had something that weak for years."

Years. He was eighteen. How long had he been drinking hard liquor for? Weren't his parents concerned?

"Drunk driving is illegal." She muttered.

"So are a lot of things. Doesn't stop 'em from happening." Diane missed his bitter tone, getting lost in her own beer-soaked brain. They drove the rest of the way with some rock radio blasting. The road was pitch black. Close to her house she realised she hadn't given him any directions. But apparently he had memorised where she lived from the last time.

"I'm going to tell the police about what we saw the other night." Said Diane.

"Sounds like a fan-fucking-tastic idea. You going to start confessing with that stray mutt dunked in a Chernobyl reactor runnin' around bothering Hawkins residents first, or how you and I were under the bleachers after school hours?" The speedometer began crawling upwards. "Sounds like a winning case. Make sure to tell them the Russians are involved, while you're at it."

"What is your problem?" She snapped at him. "You have no reason to drive me home like you're some nice respectable guy-"

"Like Harrington?" He mocked and she felt her heart tighten; that comment was a low blow.

Feigning apathy she shrugged. "You don't care about demon-dog, clearly. Oh, wait. No. This will have been a waste of effort then. "

Driving her home just because it increased his chances of getting laid was an absolute waste of time. Instead of giving her a snappy comment like she expected for calling him out, he looked over at her calmly. He had that look on again, where his lips curled gracefully upwards and his lids lulled in attraction. With beer goggles firmly lodged to her face, she couldn't help but admit she found the appeal when he looked at her like that; it sent a thrill up her spine. But she



also knew he wore those types of masks with expertise and she wasn't quite buying it.

"I think you're hot, sue me."

"No, you don't." She answered immediately.

"Do you really think so low of yourself that you can't see guys here wanting to fuck you is actually a possibility?" There was that drawl again, the one that sent a wave of frustration through her.

"I think you're playing an angle," she answered, "you always are, otherwise it wouldn't be so easy for you to slip between charming and douchey so effortlessly."

The ride had sobered her up, a little. Enough that she could take off her own seatbelt, get out of the car and walked up to the front of the house. As she went into the house she didn't realise he had followed her in, until she was in the living room. But he wasn't looking at her, he was analysing her whole house with thinly veiled contempt. Maybe he found the Doblers decor distasteful. Or maybe he was jealous. He drove a Camero, didn't he have money? Maybe he had stolen it. She wouldn't put it past him.

"I can't believe what happened back there." She said suddenly.

He turned around and looked at her. "What the hell are you on about now?"

"The way everyone turned on him."

Billy picked up a large crystal from the coffee table and examined in with raised eyebrows, like he found the whole object obnoxious. "That's the way mobs work sweetheart, they target the weak, set a hierarchy."

She wrinkled her nose at his words. It was morally wrong. And his words were so thoughtless. But maybe she had helped set the hierarchy too, by just walking away. Maybe Billy understood the world better than she did. No, that wasn't true. Steve had ruled their school for years, even over the other older students at the time. He hadn't done it through force. Sure he had been arrogant and stuck-up,

but he hadn't been needlessly aggressive like Billy was.

Billy was walking around, eyeing the room, seemingly memorising the layout and accounting for all the items. While he didn't strike her as someone who robbed houses, she wouldn't put some petty theft behind him. He sniffed. "So, you and Harrington, huh?"

"For someone who seems to hate him so much you talk about him an awful lot."

Apparently he took that as an acceptance as he snorted. His expression was mocking now. "I bet he held your hands, and looked you in the eyes, and told you how much he cared about you. Bet he made sure to keep a couple bibles between the both of you."

"Can you put that down?" She asked, eyeing the crystal warily. Her parents had taken it back from one of their trips, and told her that of course she wasn't allowed to touch it. She supposed it could break into a million pieces.

A grin formed on his face and he licked his lips. Walking towards her, he held up the object to ensure she couldn't reach it. "Scared I'm going to steal it, Princess Diane?"

"I'm worried you'll break it." He stood in front of her now, the same sardonic grin on his face he always seemed to have, with his telltale dash of recklessness glinting in his eyes. Against better judgement she reaches up anyway, determined to put it back on the table, and she uses his leather sleeve as leverage. And as she reaches up she realises just how close she is to him as their eyes locked.

And she's not sure who initiated it, but they're kissing now and she's kissing him back. For a split second he seems surprised, like he had expected her to just push him away. Burning heat raced through her veins; the last thing on her mind was stopping. His lips was rough and unrelenting not unlike Simons had been, but this sent a thrill up her spine. She supposed because unlike Simon, Billy seemed to have no real intention at all; everything was impulsive. And instead of wanting to break away from his demanding lips, she wanted more. She reached out.

Her hands were roaming his bare chest and then ran down to his abs. The crystal tumbled out of his hand and hit the ground with a thud. He was still sweaty from the party and his skin was cold to the touch but she found she didn't care at all. She was too busy exploring. He wrapped his arms around her, yanking her tightly to him until she was pressed up against his body.

She wrestled him out of leather jacket which he helped with, aggressively shrugging out of it, never breaking contact with Diane. It fell onto the floor and he kicked it further behind him.

His hand ran beneath her untucked shirt, skimming the soft skin of her torso and cupped her breast over her bra. Their breathing turned heavy. She arched into his hand as his finger began brushing over the center.

Her hands wound themselves into his hair, pulling him closer still. Absent-mindedly she noticed his hair was still damp from all the beer sprayed at the party. His hair was as unruly and wild as he was. She was enveloped in the scent of beer, cigarettes and his spiced cologne. Instead of being off-putting as he had been earlier, she was trying to get as close as she could. His lips left her, kissing a hasty trail from the corner of her lips to her neck. He attacked her throat.

He was going to leave a hickey. In that moment she didn't care. She had never had one, and the fascination with what it'd look like on her neck was a much more pressing thought than the ramifications in the morning. In fact that thought only surfaced for a brief second before being washed away. Then she stumbled slightly, losing orientation for a moment.

Suddenly he stopped and pulled back. He looked exasperated. And vexed. "You're fucking wasted." Billy muttered. She felt his heart thudding in his chest. Her cheeks were a light pink and lips swollen, but her eyes bordered on glassy and focused. After a moment he sighed heavily and then picked her up, cradling her. As he began walking upstairs she instantly wrapped her arms around his neck, and rested her head on his chest, closing her eyes. Everything was spinning so fast it turned into a blur. "You tell anyone what I'm doing and I'll kill you, got it?"

"Mhm." She answered. "What are you doing?"

Billy found her bedroom easily, nudging open her door with his foot and dumping her unceremoniously on the bed. "I'm a piece of shit. But I'm not that kind of shit-stain."

He nudged a pillow her way, before throwing himself onto her rocking chair with the pale pink blanket draped over it.

He grinned, "You won't even remember this in a few hours. Bet you'll spend all that time in that pretty little head of yours wandering how you got home. It'll be devastating for you to learn you were brought home by me. At school on Monday I'll tell you you were *grovelling* to bring me home."

"That's so lame. You're lame." She wasn't really paying attention to his words. As soon as he got mocking she had begun to tune out, little by little. Letting it be white noise.

He lit a cigarette, taking a long drag and closing his eyes. "You tell me that a lot."

"Please don't smoke in my room."

"Why? Your parent's gonna ground you somethin'? I don't see them anywhere." He looked around, pretending to see if he could spot her parents.

"I know," she sighed, "They're never here. But house rules."

A moment later he was standing up and opening her window, peering out over the forest and the houses lit up in the distance. It was almost like he didn't know what to do with himself. The cigarette danced between his fingers. His next words seemed absent-minded, and she wondered how drunk he was. "Fucking wish my parents were never here."

"Oh, what are you parents like?"

He whirled around, face hard, throwing the half-lit cigarette out the window. "I don't ask questions about your home life, don't ask questions about mine."

Diane struggled to sit up. "That's not true. You do ask. In fact, you can ask me right now too."

He breathed a laugh. "Why d'you think I'm be interested in you?"

"You keep asking questions, so you have to be somewhat interested."

Billy had switched into another mood faster than she had time to draw her next breath. It was that mood she couldn't get quite describe yet, somewhere between sardonic and embittered. "So, where are they?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Somewhere in the U.S."

"You don't know?"

"No. They never tell me anything." She knew telling Billy anything was a bad move, in both the short and long run. But she couldn't stop talking, the alcohol had the words pouring out of her mouth before she even realised she was speaking. "They only called me to yell at me for getting in trouble at school. It doesn't matter who did what, if I'm in trouble then I'm in trouble and that's my fault."

"Your parents give you everything and leave you alone. Am I supposed to shed a tear over you being a spoiled little princess all locked up and cozy in her tower?" His arms were crossed, and he leaned against the wall, eyes cast down on her.

She glared at him as best as she could under the circumstances. "I never asked for sympathy. And in case you didn't notice, you asked me, so I don't know what answer you were expecting."

They sat in silence for a while.

"Taking me home was really nice of you."

"Don't mention it. Seriously, don't." He drawled. With a bored expression and slouched against the wall with a boot up and arms crossed he looked like the poster boy of apathy. All of it together was too much, and she realised he was feigning it. That thought nearly sent a wave of laughing coursing through her. Her earnest gratitude for his help didn't fit his rebel without a cause attitude and he didn't

know what to deal with it. There was always a transaction in those forms of flattery like gratitude, except she wasn't seeking for anything.

"I promise I won't say that the big bad boy from California has signs of a heart." She rolled over. "Your secret is safe with me."

"I don't do any of that pansy shit, okay? You being drunk doesn't that change." He snapped, the lighter flame went off and on again, off and on. But it sort of did, when he had no obligation to help her. She had turned in their assignment today at school, it wasn't like he had to worry she'd die and bury him beneath an avalanche of papers.

Slowly she crawled over to him and gave him an affectionate smile. She struggled to sit up in the bed. "You know you're tough as nails, and super . . . " Man, what was that word she was looking for? Come on, brain. Function just a little bit longer tonight. " . . . You're a protector. You protected me at the school. And you protect Maxine." As her older brother - sorry, step-brother - she presumed he protected her, in his own brash way.

He looked down at her in suspicion. If he was expecting her to say she had been joking, or if he was waiting to find a teasing tone in her words he would have to wait for a very long time. But she knew Billy enough to know that he was a firecracker that could be ignited at the smallest provocation. Letting him see her interpretation of him would be enough to cage him and have him spitting fire at her. So she slid back into bed and closed her eyes, biting back a groan. Why was the bed spinning too? Alcohol was bad.

"Her name's Max." He finally said. "She hates being called Maxine."

She forced her eyes open. Billy was working his way through another cigarette. "If I promise not to say anything, can you stay? I keep seeing that thing when I'm awake, and when I'm asleep it chases me and when I fall and it leaps, then I wake up and can't fall asleep again." She confessed.

He eyed her with deep mistrust and he exhaled forcefully in exasperation. Then he began kicking off his boots. He sat on the bed, resting against the headboard. He took out his lighter, flicking it on

and off. "No one knows I stayed over, or you might find yourself run over by my car. And don't even think of taking advantage of me in my sleep."

She laughed. The beer was coaxing her towards a deep slumber and her eyes slid shut. "You know, I take it back. You're not a douchebag. I don't know what else you are, Billy, but I know you're a good person."

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## **BILLY**

The lighter cap opening and closing sped up before he finally spun out of the bed. Diane didn't even notice the shift in weight. He stared at her for a moment before shoving his hands in his jean pockets and heading off. Suddenly her room had become claustrophobic and the unconscious blonde had become oppressively overbearing. The faint smell of ivory soap, vanilla and cinnamon had begun choking him. Despite her nerdy ways and reclusive tendencies, Diane wasn't an idiot. She was right, he was playing an angle. Except, for a good, long minute he had forgotten himself he was playing at all.

He felt like he was back in his room after a storm had broken out. Except he was in a girls room, and Diane hadn't sworn at him, hadn't yelled at him, hadn't lashed out. Still, his breathing had become shallow as he slammed her front door, getting hit with the fresh night air, and slid into his car. For a moment everything had felt too comfortable, and any time he got comfortable it was violently shattered, reminding him just who the hell he was. He didn't need to wait for an axe to drop; he'd swing it himself.

For a second he sat, hands gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles whitened, then the engine roared to life. As he sped away he didn't drive towards his house, or any destination at all. The window was down, blowing the icy wind straight at him until his eyes watered. The road blurred. Instead of rolling up the window or slowing down his foot pressed the pedal harder. He sped up even more when he realised he had forgotten his jacket at Doblers. Fuck, he'd have to collect it tomorrow. There was no way she'd hear him at her front door no matter how hard he banged or hollered.

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*1 review = 1 prayer for Benny's death. Ignore for Demogorgan.*



## 7. Chapter Seven: Different Takes

DIANE

### Early Morning

With a groan she rolled out of her bed, and then ran to the bathroom to rid herself of the booze that still simmered in her stomach. It had been acidic going down and coming up with the force of a waterfall wasn't making her hangover experience any better. Crawling into the shower she let the hot water warm her up. For some reason she had been unbelievably cold this morning, her own shivers waking her up. As the steam seemed to release more of the alcohol through her pores she became more focused. What time was it even?

Throwing on a bathrobe she padded back into her bedroom: it was only 5.45 AM. Great. Well, at least she hadn't overslept. Now she was wishing she had though, because God, this hangover was deadly. When she tried to recall what had happened last night it was just a drunken haze. There was a few fragmented images she could call forth, like becoming friends with Steve again. And if they weren't friends, at least they were on friendly terms. Nancy had been angry about something. And she had been driving shotgun in the car. Steve's car, if her memory served her right. Not that she was willing to stake her life on her fleeting, hazy memories.

The curtains swayed in the breeze. With a scoff she went to swing it shut. Opening the window had clearly been a bad drunken decision on her part, and now she was sure she was going to come down with a cold.

Time dragged towards 8 A.M. when the school bus was going to drive past her house. At the last minute she ditched the idea of being on a jostling, bumpy bus and decided to cut through the backwoods and walk to school. Hopefully the fresh air would make her alert enough to survive the day of school.

Leaves crunched beneath her feet as she waded through the forest. Every now and then her mind would try to fill in blanks from yesterday night, but frustratingly kept coming up short. In the

distance she saw the football field.

Some of the guys had already changed into their gym wear, throwing around a football as they waited for gym to begin. When they saw her there were a short pause, and then they were ribbing their teammates as she walked by. But they couldn't be talking about her, right? No one cared who she was. A sense of unease crept up on her and she hitched up her backpack, walking a little faster towards the school.

It didn't get better when she entered the building and navigated through the hallways to her locker. While she didn't think she was self-centered, she was fairly sure there was much more attention being thrown her way than usual. That was when she saw Steve and made a bee-line towards him. Immediately he acknowledged her and waited for her to close the distance.

"You're just crackling with energy this morning." He greeted her.

She knew full well there were dark circles beneath her eyes. And that she looked hungover. "Oh shut up."

The whispers seemed to intensify and she glanced behind her; quickly several people pretended to look elsewhere. Seriously, what was going on?

"Steve what happened at the party last night?" Her words were slow and cautious. If she dragged her sentence long enough, maybe the bell would ring and he wouldn't be able to answer.

He sighed, then jerked his head towards the empty classroom and the color drained from her face. By the serious expression he harbored and the fact that they needed privacy just to discuss what had happened meant something really had happened.

He closed the door, and the voices outside became mere murmurs.

"Was it really that bad?" She needed to sit down before her legs gave out. He joined her, leaning on the desk.

"No. Its not like you murdered someone." He said. The way Steve had looked since she had spotted him told her that he was in a dour

mood, but it didn't seem directed towards her.

"Well what did I do? Because its sort of looking like I did something. Or like, danced naked at the party and then murdered someone. Oh God, I didn't dance naked. Right. Right?"

"No. Also, no. And I don't get how you prioritise dancing over murder." He put his hands on his hips. "Come on Dee, you know how rumours go. They start with a small, stupid spark and then just blaze up."

"What rumour is it Steve?"

He shifted on his feet.

"*Steve.*"

"Just . . . That you, um, were together with me, and you know, Simon, and, well, Billy."

"Like third base together together?"

He shrugged.

"But I didn't." She insisted, then paused. "Did I?"

"Do you actually not remember anything?"

"That's not an answer, Steve." She snapped. Horrible images were filling her head. It wasn't like she hadn't had alcohol before. Not that anyone would believe it. But she never thought she would go that wild, that every single inhibition would have been metaphorically fired out of the window by a cannon.

"We just talked. That's it. I don't know if anything happened with Simon or Hargrove. Come on, it's not a big deal."

"Yeah to you it isn't!" She cried, getting up from the desk and whirling around to face him. "Nancy hooking up with that Byers kid wasn't even true and she got 'Whore' spray-painted all over town."

Steve shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "Yeah which I helped

spraypaint because I was a huge dick. Come on, Dee, no one's going to be spraypainting anything about you."

"You don't know that." She huffed.

"If anyone does shit like that, then screw them. And hey, I'll be right here wasting my time with you to clean it up. But you'll have to fund my trip to the nail salon for any messed up cuticles I end up getting."

She deflated a little bit. Sure it was still terrible, but at least she had Steve. Then she laughed softly in surprise. That wasn't a sentence she would've thought she'd have been able to construct until a few days ago. It had sort of been her assumption they would've graduated, she would've moved to another state for University, and merrily would've never saw him again. Now she was becoming glad for their growing friendship again. Even if the air around them was still cautious.

"I don't even know how any of this happened. All I had wanted to do was just . . . go and drink a bit. And I don't get it. Then I find out I kissed multiple guys?" She mulled it over. "Especially Hargrove. I didn't even . . . " She bit her lip.

Steve didn't seem happy with the idea either. Of course, him and Hargrove had some sort of natural disdain and rivalry with each other. It wasn't about her. Still, there was something off with Steve's reaction. It was more pained than she imagined he would.

"My memory is a black drunken void. What aren't you telling me?"

"It's all just rumours. I can't tell you what's true and not true."

"Don't keep playing this game with me." The longer all of this dragged on the more her patience was wearing thin. All she wanted was to know what exactly had happened so she could try to pretend none of it had happened at all. It was better than being left in the dark and allowing her over-active imagination to fill in the blanks.

"You left the party. Together." He answered roughly.

Oh. Oh, no. Not him. He didn't care about anyone, and he definitely didn't care about her. How could she have allowed that to happen. How could *Steve*?

"But . . . But why would I go home with him?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Why didn't you stop me?"

Steve's face flooded with guilt.

"Where were you?" She asked.

"Dee I'm sorry. I got in a fight with Nance and I just . . . " He shrugged, "I just needed to get out of there."

As the full weight of her actions began to settle in she nodded slowly, looking at the floor with crossed arms. Okay. You know what, she could get through this. Rumours were just rumours. All that had happened was probably that he had driven her home. She was still good.

She glared at Steve. He had promised to take her back home too, and whatever they had argued about couldn't possibly be serious enough to warrant ditching her at Tina's party. "Whatever, Steve."

Yanking the door open she strode down the corridor to her locker, making sure she averted eye contact with everyone. Just a week or two and it'd blow over. A new rumour or scandal would take its place, and then she could at least go back to invisibility in the place of obscurity.

Trading one book for another in her locker she yelped in surprise when Carol appeared next to her. While her locker was close by, she didn't think them bumping into each other the day after the party was a coincidence. She turned being a bitch into a hobby.

Carol had a great big grin on her face. Oh, how Diane just wanted to take her books and scurry away from her locker, ducking behind a book in class. Shame was festering in her stomach. Too bad it wasn't just the alcohol making her feel slightly nauseous still. While Diane had been trying to convince herself that nothing had happened, the popular girl in front of her had a different version of her black-out events it seemed.

Carol was overly bright today. "Morning Diane. How was your night?"

"Fine." Diane shut her locker hastily and began walking to Biology.

But Carol stayed right in step with her. "Heard it was more than fine. In fact you seemed to have had quite the busy night. Hell, I could barely keep track. So like with all that nerdy organization you have, do you like keep tabs on them? Schedule the boys into your calendar?"

There wasn't anything to say. Whatever had happened, had happened. She hated it. Everyone seemed to be staring at her, and all of the whirlwind of whispers seemed to be about her. So much for staying out of the spotlight. The mensroom door swung open and she collided with Billy himself. Great. Quickly she steadied herself and took a step back.

He was wearing his usual jeans attire, and his familiar smell of cologne and cigarettes hit her harder than usual. Everything about it was the same, and yet looking at him was now entirely unfamiliar.

Carol pounced on the opportunity, ready to exploit this situation for her own cheshire-cat grinning satisfaction. She looped her arm through with Dianas to keep her from ducking of this conversation. "Well if it isn't the man of the hour."

Billy wore his usual bored expression. The last thing he seemed was entertained by Carol's flair for the dramatic, and he was barely glancing Diane's way. "There a point?"

"We were just talking about you know, you two. And last night." Carol said, then she looked at Diane. "Oh my God, you look so embarassed right now. Like your face is totally just, red."

But Carol wasn't done. "Honestly Diane, you don't have to worry about fucking him. I mean, of course it's not like super dignified to just throw yourself at the first guy when you're drunk . . . but it happens, right? *Even to you.*"

It felt like her heart was going to beat straight through her rib-cage and plop onto the floor. Billy wasn't denying it. And him and Carol hung out in the same group, enough so that she would obviously know about what had happened between them too. They had done a

lot more than just drive to her place then. She wanted to vomit. Now Billy was looking at her though, and she couldn't seem to look anywhere else.

Her face was heating up with humiliation, and she struggled to maintain her composure. Billy was watching every facial tick with the intensity of a hawk. Her mind had become a dark void. There wasn't anything she could say. Billy licked his lips slowly, in an almost antagonizing manner.

Carol patted her shoulder. "I can just feel the sexual tension. Well, I guess I'll leave you two to it!"

Then she nearly skipped away with the excitement of the pot she had stirred, and yet just close enough that she wouldn't miss out on any of the drama.

"Just can't keep your hands off me, can you Dobler." His smirk was infuriating and she wanted to hit him.

"I didn't mean to bump into you, you should've looked where you were going."

"And here I thought you wanted a repeat of yesterday night." He drawled.

"Shut the hell up." She snapped at him.

Anger flashed in his eyes before he hid it, again a sardonic expression taking over his expression. It was the one she hated the most, where he tried to provoke and trigger and channeled whatever malice was festering inside of him.

He surged forwards before she could react, only a sliver of space between them. "Why? Does the thought of my hands on your waist, crawling under your shirt -"

"*Stop.*"

"Hey, look a little more upbeat, you enjoyed it." He hissed in her ear, before striding right past her. Diane stared ahead for a moment, before taking a deep breath. Then she headed to class.

The entire time the words on the pages seemed to crawl all over the place. The teachers words were drowned out by the blood roaring through her ears. Classmates kept glancing her way, and every giggle were like finger nails on a chalkboard.

Lunch was spent locked in the bathroom.

Her eyes remained glued to the clock for the last class of the day, and as soon as it hit three P.M. and the teacher dismissed them she was out of her seat and dodging students as she hastily exited the school, nearly running.

Her feet carried her right to the woods, far from any other student. The trees groaned above her.

Diane had done it. With Billy Hargrove. The whole school knew. And she couldn't even remember it.

She walked back home with her arms crossed tightly across her chest, and her head hung low to keep the biting wind from freezing the tears that ran tracks down her cheeks.

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*Thanks Anonymous(s) for your reviews!*



## 8. Chapter Eight: On the Radar

DIANE

### Early Evening

The sun was only just begin to sink in the sky, colouring the sparse clouds brilliant cotton candy hues. In desperation to distract herself from thinking about anything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, she had decided to clean the car in the garage. Hüsker Dü's newest album Everything Falls Apart was blasting through her small headphones. She had turned it up to maximum volume, hoping the sound waves would just scramble her brain. So far, even their aggressive tunes hadn't even been able to fully dominate her thoughts.

No matter how hard she scrubbed every nook and cranny of this car, it wasn't washing away the grime she felt from her actions. She stomped her feet instinctively, trying to stave away the dropping temperatures. Her hands were red from the nipping cold. It still wasn't enough to completely rip her focus away.

The familiar roaring sound of a Camaro hit her heart and she felt her breath stop. He probably thought this was going to be a regular thing now. After all, she had apparently thrown herself at him yesterday. She scrubbed the car harder with the soaking sponge, refusing to look up, even as she heard his boots hit the driveway pebbles and the car door slam shut.

He didn't say anything. Every second that passed had her heightening anticipation turning up a few notches into pure frustration. The wait was agonising and she couldn't ignore him any longer.

"What do you want?" Diane snapped at him, refusing to look up from her car cleaning activity save for a quick glance his way.

"You have my jacket." He answered breezily.

Well she certainly didn't remember that either. Her mind began piercing in last night without wanting to. It was probably crumbled

somewhere in a corner. "Where is it?"

"Did you move it?"

"How would I do that when I don't even know where it is?" She spat out through clenched teeth.

"You really don't remember shit." He acknowledged, though he didn't seem surprised by her black-out. Of course she didn't remember. After all, it was him that had filled her in on her missing memories just a few hours earlier. The gravel crunched as he ambled over to her.

Angry tears brimmed over her eyes as she kept staring at the car door. Clutching the sponge harder she began to re-clean the car with force. "Yeah, well, I don't think I want to remember."

A long, hard silence followed. She had nothing else to say, but she knew she should just release the sponge and find his stupid jacket. Then he'd leave and she could curl up in a ball of regret. Just the moment she had seen his stupid blue Camaro had her stomach tying itself into knots. At this point it had turned into a stomach ache.

Billy knew, had even teased her about it earlier. He knew it meant something to her. And now she couldn't even remember it. Before a stray tear threatened to run down her cheek she hastily wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"We didn't fuck, alright. Just stop the fuckin' tears." He snapped at her, already finding the paper carton in his pocket.

Diane looked up, stunned. "What?"

"You heard me, Dobler." He exhaled sharply. The smoke billowed in the frigid air.

His words came as such a shock she didn't have anything to say - again - as she processed his confession. "But- "

"B-b-but, why would you do something like that?" He mimicked her, and then he looked past her and into the forest. "You think being with me is your worst nightmare come true; can't help you were

black-out drunk."

Blood began to flow back into her hand as she eased her grip on the soapy sponge. "You lied to me."

He breathed a laugh, shoving his cigarette free hand in his pocket. His exposed hand was already tinged red from the cold. "I barely did anything. You were nearly all the way there with your little scenario. Your imagination seemed a little . . . out of whack after swappin' spit with him."

The venomous shift in her tone told her all she needed to know. He was talking about Steve. "We just talked you know."

She didn't know why she was defending what had happened between her and Steve to Billy, but the words came out anyway.

The ghost of a sneer remained on his lips, but he appeared to relax a fraction.

While he appeared to be deflating, she was just winding up.

"You told me we slept together." Slowly the tense knot in her stomach was easing its vice tight grip. She felt like she could breathe again.

"Did I?" He looked back at her, eyes cool.

Instantly she replied the entire exchange in the hallway. Carol had told her they had slept together. Billy . . .

Billy actually hadn't. "But you said I enjoyed it."

"Yeah, you were slobbering all over me." He crossed his arms.

"Oh." Was all she could respond with. So, they kissed. But they hadn't done more. She exhaled in relief. For a brief moment she mulled over this rapid shift from this mornings news. So he had insinuated that they had had sex. But only after she had looked at him in horror. That wasn't the nicest thing to do and-

Her lips parted in shock. He had just admitted that the idea of her being repulsed by him was a hurtful notion. Not directly, but he had.

Diane struggled to keep the small smile threatening to pull her lips upwards from becoming visible. Billy Hargrove wasn't all the invincible, was he. She can't believe he would get that triggered over that. He had come in like a hurricane to shake up Hawkins, and something as small and stupid as that had him acting out. How was he simultaneously larger than life and yet focused on such minuscule details?

Billy Hargrove was an enigma.

Still, his actions weren't justified. They settled into an awkward silence. He had just been mean back because she had started it. Not on purpose, but she had. Not that she was going to forgive him completely, his response had still been cruel. But she was nearly too relieved to care. Nothing had happened between them.

Well. Except for that kiss.

*I don't slobber.* She wanted to protest. Except, well, she couldn't really remember anything. Her cheeks heated up in embarrassment.

"Well now everyone thinks I'm a whore."

His palm thumped over his heart. "Oh no, will the cow-shit collectin' farmers of Hawkins come after you with their pitchforks? Will the stay-at-home moms clutch their pearls?"

"Tell everyone nothing happened." It was something he had to do. He had to make things right again.

Billy didn't seem convinced as he raised a dark eyebrow. "Why do you care so much anyway, I thought you were rushing to get out of this dump in a few months anyway."

"It's the principle." Diane cried.

"Never said anything about us anyway." Was his way of dodging the responsibility.

"Keeping silent is basically the same thing as agreeing it happened."

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm not spending my time convincing some

hicks about you trying to leech yourself to my neck instead of dragging me to bed. It's semantics, Dobler."

It wasn't *semantics*. They were two different things. Pressing her lips together she momentarily retreated into her mind. Even her kiss was something she had wanted to be romantic with someone who she cared about, and who cared for her. But the thought of Billy wasn't making her as angry or defeated as she thought she would've felt. Instead she just felt neutral. And she wasn't quite sure how to address *that* fact, so she decided she just wouldn't be thinking much about it at all. There was also the fact she couldn't remember the kiss, and she wasn't quite sure if she really wanted too. Technically, she could still get a do-over.

But it was semantics. This was Hawkins High. Steve was right, rumours just needed a spark to turn into an explosion. There was no putting this back in the bottle. And that meant Billy Hargrove was right too, and that frustrated her more than it should've.

It was then that Billy seemed to actually look at her car, and then he whistled in awe. He stared at the car, approaching it cautiously like it was a wild stallion. But in his mind, it probably was. "Don't tell me this is your car."

She supposed this was his way of brokering an uneasy peace between them. He hadn't demanded his jacket back yet.

"It's not my car."

He whirled around, eyes wide. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. You got *this* and you just walk everywhere? You don't deserve her." His fingers trailed the hood of the car.

In response she tipped her head to the side. She never understood the obsession with cars. And Billy, of course, threw an insult her way when he could. Her next words were ones she knew always launched men into entire monologues. But they spilt out between loose lips anyway, "It's just a car."

He stared at her like she had sprouted two heads. "This is a BMW M3. One of the best damn race-cars out there. It even has a catalytic

converter."

"Do you want me to continue staring at you like I understand nothing, or do you want me to pretend those words make sense?"

He rolled his eyes. "Give me the keys, I'm taking her out for a spin. She deserves to be treated right."

"Do you . . . want me to leave you two alone so you and my genderless car can have a moment?"

His hand motioned for the keys.

"No."

"Diane." His voice had grown sweet, and as he took small steps towards her, his fingers trailed over the hood of the car. He may have been going for sweet but he looked more like a predator about to go in for the kill.

"The car insurance is family members only. And you need to learn to take no for an answer." Technically the car was hers, but she used it so little it was still basically her parents. Diane was absolutely resolute in the fact that her parents car was going to remain firmly in that garage. Billy could try all of his usual tricks, but he was beginning to wear out his nonexistent welcome.

"Then you drive." He argued with a superficial smile that was supposed to persuade her. He only seemed to have two modes with her: convince her with threats or convince her with saccharine sweet charm.

"I'm not interested." She answered promptly. "And I have . . . stuff . . . to do. Like study for an English Lit exam."

"You don't have your license yet." He admonished, completely disregarding what she had actually said.

"I do have my license," she protested, "Driving just makes me nervous."

Damn. She was beginning to engage him with arguments. She needed

to circle right back around to just shutting him down. Silently debating whether it would be rude to directly ask him to just get the hell off her lawn she decided that no, it really wasn't. He was still an asshole for insinuating something had happened between them, especially now that the entirety of the school believed it too.

An engine interrupted the debate and she looked behind him. That was strange, a van was pulling up the driveway. Except there was no one that was supposed to be doing any work on their house.

Inside the white van was a woman and man with blue onesie outfits, reminiscent of hazmat outfits. The van pulled up right in front of the two teens. On the side, painted in blue it said: Department of Energy. She had seen several in the past year; it looked like a new initiative from the government. They were probably expanding their business in Hawkins and neighbouring towns.

They hopped out with small, formal smiles on their faces. Both of them walked in sync over to her and Billy. The woman was older, with white hair and sunken wrinkles. The man was clearly younger, perhaps in his thirties, with a gentle face.

"Hi there, I'm Judith Rhode. This is my colleague Rob Sussman." Both of them shook hands with teens; Judith's hand was particularly leathery. "We're from the Department of Energy here in Hawkins."

As if everyone by now didn't know about the national department right on the outskirts of town. The running joke in Hawkins was that the lights were on in the facility but no one was there. With the exception of her parents, who basically weren't ever even in Hawkins, there wasn't one person in the town she could recount for that actually worked there.

"Oh, um, nothing has been scheduled for today, I don't think. Or maybe my parents told me and I forgot."

Judith gave a watery smile. "This isn't a meeting, we were just wondering if we could ask you a few questions. The both of you."

Yeah, right, like she wanted Billy around answering any questions. Her parents always told her professionalism was the measure of your

worth, and the Californian next to her would definitely not be able to do that. And then there'd be whispers about the Doblers in the office and by the water-cooler and she'd be to blame. "Well Billy was actually just leaving, so . . ."

"Depends," Billy said, pretending Diane had never spoken as his eyes bore into the older woman's, "if it's any questions on those beautiful brown eyes of yours, I'll be more than happy to participate."

Diane's eyebrows shot up at his blatant flirting. But the look of appraisal Judith gave Billy told her that the older woman was falling for it. "We're here on official business . . ."

"Billy." He supplemented, the tip of his tongue skimming over the tip of his teeth in a languid manner.

Rob began wandering a little around the parking lot, peaking into the garage first curiously. Diane kept an eye on him.

"I'm Diane." She supplemented, though she didn't think the woman was all that interested in her.

Judith pulled her eyes from the youthful teenage boy in front of her. She didn't look nearly as pleasantly at Diane. "There's been some power outages across Hawkins recently, and we suspect it's due to some animals in the area unfortunately chewing through some of the wires."

Billy leaned against the car, tilting his body just enough that he was in closer proximity to Judith. "Bet you had a lot of angry Hawkins residents. But you strike me as the kind of woman who handles these types of things with grace."

In her opinion, Hargrove was laying it on a little too thick. But this woman didn't seem to share that sentiment. But there weren't many handsome eighteen year olds who had his confidence and charm. Especially not many who would brazenly flirt with a woman that looked two be three times his senior. Maybe when Diane was her age she'd also be flattered too, but she doubted it.

"Have you seen any type of large animals recently? A staff member at



your high school said there had been something around the school, would you know anything about that?"

Diane bit her lip. The thuds as it threw itself against the gym door echoed through her mind as clearly as if she were right there now.

"During school hours?" Billy asked, face twisted in concern.

"Why would that matter?" Rob barked over his shoulder. He was at the edge of the house, peaking around and into the swathe of forest that began downhill.

"Mr. Sussman, getting a good education is our patriotic duty. I would hate to know any fine, young Hawkins mind missed something."

Rob didn't need to be looking this way for Diane to know his eyes had rolled into the back of his head in disdain for Billy's words that bordered on sardonic.

"It was after school hours apparently." Said Judith.

Something tugged at Diane's mind at her words. The energy employee had come here to ask general questions on apparent power-line outages, yet she spoke as if she knew of a specific event that had already occurred, like she just wanted confirmation. In response she shifted on her feet, growing uncertain with the line of questioning.

"Well I didn't see anything. But of course I wouldn't ever break the rules such as entering the Hawkins High building after hours. Would you, Diane?" He asked.

This was it. She had one chance to solidify her allegiance to the government. Her government. The one her parents even worked for. All she'd have to do was spill everything to them. About how they really were in the school after-hours, but that was only because a monster was chasing them, and it most definitely was not natural. But again, her mouth wasn't cooperating with her and she remained silent. It only seemed to increase Judith's persistence.

"The last reported citing was nearby here, just two days ago." Judith said, looking over at her colleague who had trailed closer to his colleague.

"Yup. It was two days ago." Rob confirmed with his thick Midwestern accent. Those employees really did come from everywhere but Hawkins itself. Slowly, Rob was inching towards the front porch.

Two days ago was exactly the day the monster had tried to attack them at school. She knew she should tell them, about whatever it was that they had seen, except something was holding her back. Diane glanced at Billy.

He didn't seem like he was going to tell them about the creature they had seen either. His words came back about not trusting the police. Then he did the complete opposite of everything he had been throwing at the two employees so far. Slowly he began nodding. "Actually, hold on. I think . . . but no. It couldn't be."

Like a switch both of the employees perked up; Rob stopped and turned around, ambling closer to Billy. "Please, anything at all you may have seen."

"There was something. When I was driving a few nights ago I swore I saw something near Hawkins Elementary School, right near the forest. Walked weird."

Judith was nodding enthusiastically. "Anything else?"

"Sort of looked like a deer, but walkin' real funny. 'Course, it was dark and the animal was far away. You think it's deer eating through the wires?" He asked, hand on his hip. For someone who had made it clear he didn't care for the town he had forcibly been relocated to, he sure was good at acting concerned for even the power lines of the town.

"Sure, rabid animal are capable of a lot." Rob had previously been looking around the corner of the house out into the forest, but had slowly made his way back to his colleague.

"If you remember anything else or see anything else, call us, will you?" Judith asked.

"Oh I don't know. It's real dark and I'm not always payin' attention to what's out there. But I guess I can do that. You can just give me your

number; I never forget to call a beautiful woman." He wetted his bottom lip.

"Yeah how 'bout my business card instead, kid?" Rob asked, whipping out a small card. Diane snorted in amusement.

Billy pulled it out of his outstretched fingers. Even though she already had the departments number, but these two didn't seem concerned with the fact her parents worked there at all. In fact, it barely seemed to register for them at all. They were much more concerned with this animal.

"We just have a hard time recollecting if we missed out on anything." Diane finally said. Whether or not to tell them the truth was something she was still struggling with. Maybe she would call them.

"Of course. It would just be a shame if it came back, after all." Judith said.

Diane stiffened immediately. The woman's words echoed her only just two days earlier. The knowledge over when Diane and Billy had run into the animal. After school hours. They had known both of them were there then.

And that line Judith had just said.

*What if it comes back?*

They had heard their conversation in the kitchen. Somehow, they had been there. They knew.

Diane didn't know how yet. But these employees knew things, more than they were letting on. Why were they lying? What did they know about this monster? A chill went up her spine as the severity of the situation hit. Professional employees from the mysterious Energy building were pursuing this as well, and it was serious enough to create a cover story for.

"Mr. Sussman," Billy turned to him, "Why do you think a deer is busy eating through power lines when it could be electrocuted to death?"

"When animals go rabid, it's hard to predict their behaviour, son."

Rob said with tight smile that threatened to break the skin on his chapped lips.

Billy stiffened at his comment and seemed to struggle with reigning himself in. The man was being condescending, and she didn't think she'd care at all if Billy decided to get into it with an adult. But this was her property, and they worked in the same department her parents did. It would be embarrassing if either blew a fuse now.

She placed a hand on Billy's arm. "Well Mr. Sussman we promise we'll give a call if we see anything. Is that alright?"

Rob sighed. "You got our number too?"

"Certainly. It's even on our corkscrew board in the kitchen."

"Fine." He sighed again, inching his way to the car.

Judith nodded, and then focused on Billy with an enchanted smile. "Thank you for your all your help."

"No, Judith, thank *you*."

Diane was about to lose her eyesight with the force that her eyes rolled back into her head. She had no words for him right now.

They watched the van take off, neither saying anything until the van was out of sight.

"I can't believe you cooperated with them that easy." She grumbled. For someone who went on about how not to trust the justice figures in the community, he didn't appear to have any qualms cooperating when it came down to it. But that should have been the smart thing to do, like she should've done when they had asked.

"And what did I tell them?"

"You told them about what we had seen."

"A deer with a weird limp is really what we saw?" He lit another cigarette, the last in his carton.

"It's not completely off the mark, is it."

"They already know what they're lookin' for. First they tell us they don't know what it is, and then all of a sudden they know for a fact that thing was rabid? Government's always full of shit."

She opened her mouth to retort before closing it in surprise. Even she hadn't picked up on that. She wanted to argue that he was wrong, the government wasn't always full of shit. Her parents worked for the government, and they were good people. The government was there to help the people, that was their job. But before she could reply he was already talking about, voice sharp.

"Just telling them what they're expecting to hear. People like that are all the same. Tell them sweet nothings and they won't go searching for anything."

Diane shook her head and turned sharply on her heel. She went straight inside of the house. And promptly began tearing apart her living room. When her parents had too much red wine they always went on about Russian spies and microphones. Maybe they had been right the entire time. Or maybe they were wrong, and she could prove that there was nothing there. That Billy was wrong, and they weren't just asking questions they didn't already know the answer to.

But, she never had seen those employees before. And they hadn't seemed to care much about her parents even though they probably worked together.

Couch pillows went flying. The rug became skewed as she dragged it partially to the side. Paintings and photographs went carefully onto the floor after the back of the frames were thoroughly inspected. Her fingers ran under tables and chairs. Still, there was nothing. Even the curtains didn't go unchecked. The living room was beginning to look like the aftermath of a hurricane.

For a good, long minute Billy appeared non-plussed. "Before I asked what in the fuck is going on, where's my jacket?"

After putting down the other lamp she strode over to the other side of the room and threw his bundled up leather jacket at him. He caught

it with one hand. Then unravelled the sleeve where the blood had been.

Her head whipped around. The entire room was upturned. Where was it? Doubt began pulling at her. She didn't even really know what an implanted microphone would actually look like. And this wasn't a spy movie, there wasn't any real reason to put one in her house.

Billy gave a nod of satisfaction; the blood splatters had completely disappeared.

Maybe there was a microphone was on the kitchen. She paused. What was she doing? This was insane, and her response had been triggered by paranoia. Sure, the situation was weird enough to be considered a coincidence. But that didn't mean there were anything. She should just stop looking.

A thin layer of sweat had accumulated on her forehead and she wiped it away hastily with the back of her hand.

The fireplace. She hadn't looked there. Everywhere else, but not there.

Her fingers began skimming the edges, and then she ducked her head inside, looking up. Squinting she began to use her fingers too to guide her up the chimney.

"Fuck." She whispered. There it was. A small lump, and then the wire that connected it, running right up the chimney.

They had two fireplaces, one located in the dining room. The one here was just decorative. It was the perfect place to put a microphone without having to worry about it being found. They had known the entire time that both her and Billy knew about the demon dog creature. At least, enough to warrant a light questioning.

"The hell are you doing searching in the f-"

"I was looking for the car keys." She interrupted sharply. He had explained that he had told the Energy Department employees what they wanted to hear. Well, she could play that game too. They didn't know she knew about their microphone. But first she just needed to

process everything.

"And the k-"

"You wanted to take it for a spin, right?" She said. Loudly. Standing up she strode over to him, navigating through the now haphazard room.

"You just decided to have a change of heart?"

"If you don't want to drive with me, I'll go alone."

He thought about that deal for a moment with narrowed eyes as he scrutinised her. But it was an opportunity that was too good to pass up.

"That's what I thought." She said, brushing past him. Standing on the porch she looked over her shoulder. "You coming or not, Hargrove?"

After a pause his lip curled and he shrugged a shoulder, stepping over the threshold. Diane shut the door behind her while he walked to the car.

"I'm driving." Diane said, manoeuvring past him to open the car door.

She expected him to put up a fight, but he held up his hands in mock-surrender and strode over to the other side.

The engine roared to life, startling her. Clutching the steering wheel she took a deep breathe, and pressed down on the peddle. "For the record, I'm still angry at you."

The car jumped a few feet, and then picked up speed as she drove out of the winding driveway. They needed to get out of here. And she needed to find out why her house had been bugged.

## 9. Chapter Nine: Forks in the Road

The car was silent for a while, before he fiddled with the radio until the radio was blasting whatever was most popular at the moment. Her knuckles were white as she clutched the wheel like any sudden movement would have them skidding right off the road and into a ditch. Billy doubted that'd happen, she drove slower than his grandma, and she was six feet in the ground.

Unlike the other girls who prattled on about this and that or the other while he slammed his head against the seat and hoped the force would knock him out, Diane stayed silent. After telling him she was still unhappy with him (which what the hell had he even really done?), she had retreated into herself after spontaneously inviting him for a joyride. Her unending silence was like an itch in his brain.

And in that moment he thought it was ironic, the way everyone seemed to find her impossible to read, shrouded in her dark clothes and behind sealed lips, when she was so startlingly transparent. The smile that tugged at the corners of his lip was immediately pressed right down into a hard, angry line.

There was no reason to be that amused by her. When words had failed her, she had shown just how unhappy she was by her pursed lips. Except she wasn't shrieking at him, or crying. Boredom was letting his brain lull back into places he didn't care to think about ever. He didn't do bored, nor did he ever get waited on.

The third song came on. He hated this one, some happy shit about never stopping believing in love. It was bullshit. Leaning forwards he fiddled with the knob again.

In the prolonged silence he wanted to know exactly what she was thinking. He wanted to know why she had upended her living room like an alcoholic searching for a bottle they knew had been emptied long ago; he wanted to know why she wanted to drive - with him - when she had been so stubborn mere minutes ago; he wanted to know what that little crease between her brows was about.

*A penny for your thoughts?* He wanted to ask and this time he did grin,



though it looked more like a grimace.

*A penny for your thoughts.* Christ, where had he even heard that uttered out loud, and with sincerity? Right in Hawkins, of course. A penny for your fucking thoughts.

Next time some small-town Indiana bumpkin asked him for a god damn penny he'd gladly shove it right where the sun-

"Um, which way do I turn?" She asked suddenly and he was yanked out of his reverie.

"What?"

"To get to the quarry." She clarified, keeping her eyes focused on the road. He was surprised she hadn't drilled a hole into the asphalt yet by the intensity she bore straight into the ground. "I figure you'd know."

"Yeah and why's that?"

"It's where everyone goes when Lovers Lane is full."

"Dobler does know things, then."

"Even the deaf would hear the shrieking that happens in the hallways." She replied, eyes remaining on the road with determination.

"Turn right up here." He answered. She followed his instructions, trusting him out of necessity. "It's almost funny how hard you pretend to be above it all."

"Excuse me?"

The trees grew more sparse as they got closer to the quarry. Fluffy clouds gathered on the horizon. The road began transitioning from smooth asphalt to the unkempt cement trail. It was straight from here on out until the quarry.

"Those dark, frumpy clothes you always wear." He looked at her critically and she shot daggers at the road fully intended for him,

"Being the last in and the first out of classrooms; hiding in the library reading next weeks assignment during lunch; walking to school two miles just so you don't have to be crammed in a small shitty bus filled with your classmates . . . get real."

"Not all of us are obsessed with high school popularity you know." Her hair whipped around her face as he rolled down the window, lighter and cigarette carton already in the palm of his other hand.

"You do everything you can so people can't talk to you. Don't know Dobler, that sounds pretty," he leaned forwards into her personal space, the cigarette smoke curling out between his lips, "scared, to me."

"Not going to parties and getting doused in beer doesn't make me scared." She answered through gritted teeth.

That familiar manic expression had taken hold of its eyes again, it did whenever he tried pushing her to her limit. "Feels better to reject someone before they can reject you first."

"Speaking from personal experience?" She shot back.

The edges of his lips began curving into a grin.

He leaned even closer, encroaching into her space and filling her head with cologne and cigarettes. "Drive faster."

Her hands rubbed and clutched the steering wheel tighter. "That sounds like its going to become more dangerous."

"Live a little." Cigarette smoke filled up the front of the car. "Come on Diane, just a little more pressure on the peddle, feel her purr."

Reluctantly she put her foot down a fraction. The speedometer barely moved.

"What's stopping you?"

"We could die." At this speed she didn't dare glance over at him.

"We all die someday."

"Well I'm not interested in expediting that."

"If you're so scared of living you can't even drive right, then why not just die now." He said.

"I'm not scared." She snapped.

His face was daring, eye brow lifted up as he silently taunted her.

Biting her lip she took a deep sigh. Just a little faster. Just a few more miles per hour, if only just to shut him up. But she should know better by now. If Billy received an inch, he'd demand a mile and then the whole distance.

The forest was already a blur. The engine vibrated as the car sped up. They were entering the area near the quarry, soon it was going to be straight road only with nothing but flatland and rocks on either side. Just a little more: she was slammed into the back of her seat along with Billy as she pressed down too hard. She gave a small cry of shock but Billy was ecstatic.

He shot forwards in his seat, one hand on the dashboard, the other gripping the back of her seat.

"Don't slow down." He said, suddenly removing his seatbelt.

"Wh-wh-" She began as he rolled down the window and gripped the outside, hoisting himself to sit on the window frame. If he was saying anything she couldn't hear it over the wind. His one foot was on the seat, the other firmly planted on the car mat.

Grass was beginning to spring in-between the stones the closer they got to the quarry. Right, shit. Quarry.

"Billy-" She yelled.

He hit the car roof in response. No, she was not going to shut up.

"Billy!" She yelled, "You need to get back in."

She had underestimated how close they were. The only way she could stop before they plunged over the quarry was a rapid stop, and

if she did so now he'd go flying.

"Billy!" She screamed, and finally he swung himself back in. Already he was hastily trying to find the seatbelt and wrangled it over his form. From his vantage point he had seen the quarry's jagged edge.

She couldn't wait any longer. Her foot jammed against the brake and both of them jerked forwards sharply. But he had clicked his seatbelt in a split second before. The car screeched and slid, bumping as they went off the road. The smell of burnt tire was acrid. The car turned to the side slightly, and then came to a stop, only a stones throw from the ledge. She looked out over the window and could see the water that lay far, far below.

They had almost died. She had almost killed them. He might have egged her on but she had risen to the bait. And it was her who was the driver. Technically - well, legally, she'd be at fault for both of their deaths. All because she had become indignant at his needling.

Slowly she rested her head against the steering wheel. She was still alive. She laughed and then groaned as the shame hit her. She had been raised better. She was supposed to be the mature one who didn't get into reckless situations.

But the giggles from the exhilaration of the whole situation bubbled back up. She had survived, and so had he. She had driven faster and they were both still here, and she had never felt more alive. Finally she slumped back into her seat, hands still clutching the steering wheel with white knuckles as she turned to look at him, a smile still playing on her lips. Her hair looked like chaos and the blood was thrumming in her veins.

He was already staring at her, and she didn't know how for how long now. He had a strange look in his eye she couldn't identify, like his eyes had grown brighter, lighter.

"What?" She asked, glancing down at her clothes. Except he wasn't looking at her like he was mocking her with lustful look he usually had as his eyes trailed up and down her form. The light in his eyes was almost innocent. Though that would be the last adjective she'd use to describe him.

The small smile on her face faded. She righted herself in her seat. "Right. We should talk."

"Yeah?" His tongue skimmed the bottom of his teeth. "I can think of another language we can use. I can teach you. I'm . . . a very patient instructor."

She shot him a scathing look before getting out of the car and slamming the door. Crossing her arms she marched towards the edge of the quarry. She must've been blinded by the sun or adrenaline, because Billy Hargrove didn't have an innocent bone in his body.

Still, her face had heated up and she swallowed at the way the suggestive words slid off his tongue with charming ease. Diane sped up a little, tempering her features so he wouldn't pick up on it. If he caught even a fraction of her reaction he would gain the upper-hand, and she wasn't good enough in that game to hold her own.

And really, she had something serious to talk about that she couldn't be derailed in. This was too important.

The air was getting chilly and goosebumps erupted on her skin despite the layers of clothing she wore. The crunching of gravel grew louder as Billy traipsed over to her in no particular hurry.

Sparing no time she rummaged around inside her jacket.

Diane took out the black microphone in her pocket and showed it to him on splayed palm.

"The hell's that?" He narrowed his eyes in scrutiny.

"It's a microphone. I found it in my chimney."

"That . . . is why you dragged me out here?"

"I didn't *drag* you. And yeah, it is. Someone's been recording everything happening in my house."

"Maybe your parents like to get freaky."

"They do not get freaky." She wrinkled her nose.

"Oh Dobler, don't tell me we have to go over this now. You see, when a man meets a wom-"

"I know how that works." She snapped impatiently. Diane didn't know how, but Billy seemed to have an uncanny ability of derailing her focus. "They wouldn't do this. Someone's bugged our house and I don't know why."

"Is the car bugged?"

"I don't know." She admitted. "I just . . . someones been listening into all of our private conversations."

"So?"

"So?" She spluttered. "So why would anyone go through the effort of bugging my house? I want to know what they're searching for."

"And when you find these people who have taken the time to bug up your house you'll what? Confront them? Ask if they're getting their rocks off listening to your parents going at it in the living room?"

"That's the plan, I guess." She answered stiffly. Everything had been impulsive since she had found the device, and telling Billy was going about as well as expected. Except she hadn't needed to tell him at all. But the confession had burst through, needing to be spoken aloud. As soon as she had spoken the words, they had taken more force. They were now a fact thrown into the universe.

Her house had been bugged. Someone was spying on them, and she didn't know for how long or until what end.

"You wouldn't confront a raccoon if it were rummaging through your garbage can."

"Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Curiosity is just playing stupid games. And stupid games win stupid prizes." He answered. The familiar sharpness shone through his eyes again, signalling some memory only he was privy to.

"Right. I get it. It doesn't involve you so it doesn't matter." She

snapped, crossing her arms. Again she battled the feeling that she was completely crazy and there was a rational explanation for everything. That's what she had been taught.

Oh no. Oh, maybe that's what all this was. Her face became blank. In the ensuing chaos she had forgotten to take her daily pills. She hadn't even remembered when she had begun taking them it was that long ago. They were for anxiety or something. Her mom had once told her she was born with it.

After a moment she shook her head in defeat. "Never mind. This was stupid."

She walked back to the car and waited for Billy to finish smoking his next cigarette and apparently contemplate his existence as he stared over the quarry. Finally he flicked it over the edge and trudged back to join her.

He had gotten what he had come for, which was a ride in her car. Well, partially what he had come for. If it had been up to him, he would've have gotten to ride in the drivers seat himself and burnt rubber.

Her irritation only grew on the way back as he continued drumming his fingers against the dashboard.

They hit the main road again that would take her back to her house. They passed several fields looking desolate post-harvest. Large barrels of hay littered some of the properties in large batches. They'd soon be carted off to the seasonal Halloween fair.

The car rolled to a stop at an intersection.

"Huh." He said.

She waited for him to elaborate. But after a few moments of silence her curiosity was gnawing at her and she prompted him, "Huh *what?*"

He waved his hand out his window. "Looks like our little friends are here too."

The van that had come to her house just hours earlier rounded the

corner, turning around a corner just as she was forced to stop at the traffic light.

"They had to have come from Hawkins High. Weren't they just there a few hours ago?" She asked absent-mindedly.

The car swerved as she hastily decided to pull left towards the direction of the van instead of towards her house. All she'd need was just one last conversation with the energy department employees, then she would know she was going crazy with anxiety and would go home. Then take her pills, and wait for the looks she'd get at Hawkins High as Billy no doubt told the people he hung out with like Carol about how loner Diane was a designated loner for a reason.

He stared at her unabashedly. "You're going to stalk them."

"You got something better to do?" She raised a brow.

"Literally anything else."

"Fine, I'll drop you off, where do you want to go?"

"Oh no," He shook his head with a slow developing grin, "I'm not passing off the chance for you to humiliate yourself, Nancy Drew."

"Well I'll just pin it on you if I get caught." She answered smoothly.

"That little plan of yours failed before it even began."

"Yeah and why's that?"

"Because I'm Billy Hargrove." He winked.

The light turned green.

"If we could channel your ego into power you'd put the Hawkins power plant out of business starting yesterday."

At what sounded like a smothered laugh disguised as a cough she glanced over, but he was looking out the window. The collar of his denim jacket was slightly askew and she itched to rectify it. But then she'd be stuck in a confined space with him as he mocked her



endlessly for reaching out to touch him.

The pines reflected on the windows of the car. Far ahead she could see the little dot of the van. Dry leaves were upended and spun in large arcs as they raced down the road.

"Now that you can drive I'm sure you'll put this sweet thing to good use."

She snorted. "The only place this is going it back into the garage."

"Probably a good idea. An upper-class girl like you driving around the riffraff of town, what would your parents say?"

"Driving a Camaro doesn't make you poor, either."

"I meant Harrington and the like." He sniffed, acting offended he would even be considered to be in the poorer category of Hawkins residents.

"He's nice." She answered, refusing to add more. He certainly had a few hang-ups, but Steve Harrington was the one she didn't understand yet. Everything about Billy's world centred around cool cars, and being popular and getting together with the most attractive girls he could find.

Steve used to be the reigning king of Hawkins High, but since school began again he had changed. The untouchable friendship trifecta between him, Tommy and Carol had fractured irreparably. Now he hung around the prim Nancy Wheeler and Jonathon Beyers of all people. He was currently in some social limbo between popularity and being a loser. By all accounts he should've been ignored by Billy.

"Why do you want to be with just one guy so bad?" He asked.

"Why don't you?" She replied.

"Because I'm into girls."

He knew full well what she was asking. Diane bit back a sigh. "Why do you care?"

"Well I was thinkin' of studying Psych after graduation, and thought you'd be a great case study."

"You have issues too, you know." She said.

He laughed harshly. "Yeah, well, I didn't just invite someone I don't even like onto a road-trip with me."

She concentrated harder on the road and pressed her lips into a tight line. Then she fumbled with the radio, finally managing to press find the knob. She turned the sound up, hoping it would drown out anything he said in the future.

They were getting closer to the South side of town, office buildings popping up more frequently and interrupting the flowing green of the forest. The van pulled onto the main street.

By the time she was close enough to make the turn the van had disappeared. Her eyes scanned the environment hawkishly. Then did a double take before immediately slowing down. The van had pulled into the seedy bar at the edge of town. The gravelly lot was nearly filled with the residents alcoholics vehicles.

"What are they doing at the bar?"

"Well it's called Happy Hour for a reason." He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand with an air of exasperation.

"On company time?"

His eyes rolled over and he stared at her with the slightest raise of a brow.

"Well I'm going in." She parked the car on the side of the road instead, trying to keep some distance from the people she had impulsively decided to stalk. Quelling the feeling of disbelief over her own actions she reached for the car door.

His hand grabbed her wrist and she whipped around to glare at him. He was far from intimidated. "You won't get in."

"Well not with that attitude." Diane replied.

She swore she saw the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Your face looks like it belongs on a giant poster that says *Come to Church, it's real swell to sing about Jesus.*"

Her eyes flickered to the rearview mirror in response. Why did she had to look like she was barely of age while Billy Hargrove got to look like he was in his early twenties? They were only a year apart in age.

"If I just looked older I'd be taken seriously." The words slipped out of her mouth with a sigh weighed down with years of frustration.

He snorted. "You won't be taken seriously because you don't take yourself seriously."

She opened her mouth to retort but snapped it shut. *Focus, Diane.*

Instead she forced smile and said, "If I buy you a beer will you go in with me?"

He held up his hand. *Three.*

"We're on a mission here." She scowled.

"Correction. *You* are on a mission. I'm here to drink and get free entertainment."

She looked out the window for a moment as she contemplated. She did have the money, but it was the principle. They shouldn't even be in a bar. Both of them were below the legal drinking age.

"Fine."

It was only when he let her go did she realise he had been holding her the whole time. The warmth from his hand had seeped past her sleeve and lingered on her skin.

As she walked cautiously towards the dark door she tried to see if she could find the head of the bouncer in the smoky round window that had been placed into the upper part of the door. She nearly jumped as she felt Billy's hand on her lower back.

He leaned closer, lips brushing the shell of her ear. "Look bored, let me do the talking, and stay behind me."

To her surprise there was no bouncer as he swung the door open. The cloying smell of stale smoke wafted out of the bar and they stepped inside. A jukebox was playing old rock in the corner.

The wooden stools were worn smooth was years of use and the black-and-white laminated floor tiles had begun peeling. She stood partially behind Billy as he walked with ease. "Get a seat in the corner." He muttered.

The bartender glanced up for a moment, saw Billy and then looked back down at the glass he was cleaning. She moved to an empty corner.

As Billy ordered himself beers on her dime her eyes flitted through the hazy room to find Judith and Rob huddled in the corner with a third man she had never seen before. Their heads were close together as they spoke tersely.

She wasn't as thrilled as she thought she would be to find out she wasn't crazy. This meant there was a rabbit hole to follow, and everyone knows Alice ended up lost in Wonderland.

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**A/N:** Sorry for the disappearance, readers. Life has been hectic but I crawled out of the woodwork to keep updating and finish this story. Thank you for all the reviews and the PM's demanding updates.

As for S3: I feel pretty happy I had the same interpretation as the ST writers did on Billy's character which is why I was drawn to writing him in the first place. Not so happy about his ending though.

**Anon1:** There isn't anyone I had in mind when writing Diane, I just thought her up in my own head :)

**Guest1:** Thank you! Capturing his character is tricky imo, just since there's that so much nuance in his misguided actions since he was never given the proper tools to tackle his emotions growing up in a volatile household. So hopefully I'll be able to continue keeping him

in character while letting Diane push him in the compassion department and having him (eventually) face the fact that he himself is valued.

**Cosmo39:** Thanks! I love creating OC's but I know they're not popular with everyone lol

**Laila3374reads:** I got inspired by how character-driven the show is and definitely wanted both Billy and Diane to emotionally drive each other/the plot of the story forwards.

## 10. Chapter Ten: Brink

The light above the table had a green mosaic cover, bathing them in a slight greenish hue. She shifted on the barstool, forcing her face to look neutral and bored. She had totally been in bars before, including the notoriously seedy *Proud Stout*. Because she was of age and not doing anything illegal whatsoever.

The bartender gave a chuckle at something Billy said, glancing up at Diane for a moment before shaking his head. His name tag was partially shrouded by his stubby hand as he reached into the front pocket of the pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a lighter. He lifted a cigarette up to his thin lips almost hidden behind his thick brown beard.

Scratching his ruddy cheek with one hand, he gave Billy the lighter with the other. Then he swiped the cash off the table, and poured two beers from the tap. They came with a thick layer of foam.

Taking one in each hand Billy came over to join her.

Both Judith and Rob had their backs turned to her, and all she could see was the face of the man with the sharp dark eyes. His lips were drawn tight together as he gave a terse nod. In one hand was a still untouched beer, condensation running down onto the top of his hand.

Then the mans eyes flickered over to her, sensing her staring. Quickly she glanced down at the table. The stool creaked as Billy threw his leg over the chair and dropped down.

Her lungs began itching with every inhale of smoke that filled her lungs and coated them in their toxins.

Billy eyed her. "Relax. You're actin' guiltier than a nun after a one-stand."

"I am completely relaxed right now." She said impatiently.

He raised a brow, before taking a giant swig of the chilled beer. He

hastily wiped away the beer foam on his upper lip with the back of his hand. "You'd be a lot more convincing if you talked with me instead of staring at that table like you want to murder them."

Diane turned towards him. "I do not look like I want to murder him."

"You don't look like you're for fun."

"I know how to have fun and look like I'm having fun too."

"Except looking serious is your default setting."

She grabbed the other beer and took a sip.

"An entire teeny, tiny sip? You're going off the rails." His mocking words were softened by that charming smile he had perfected.

"Ha, ha. Real funny. I have a beer, I'm sitting with you. I look natural now." She took another deeper sip. She hated the bitter taste of beer.

Then her eyes flickered over to the table with the officials to see a tan folder being slid across towards the stranger. The folder bulged with papers, and several corners of documents were peeping out through the top and sides.

By the way the stranger quickly grabbed onto the folder and pulled it down onto his lap, this wasn't official government business. Was he Russian?

"We have to tell someone. This can't be legal."

"Tattle on some shady dealing you don't understand? I'd pay to see the police department tell you that you're just a imaginative, bored teenager, except I know I'll get it for free."

"Their job is to help us. They'll listen. The weird animals, the wire-tapping, the dealings. I don't know, it's all tied together somehow. And if we told the police they probably already know about it."

"Their job isn't to protect you, or me, or any other schmuck in this town."

"So what do they do?" She whispered furiously, barely paying attention to the shady dealings.

"Not their damned job." He answered back breezily, but there was a sharp glint in his eye again. "They only look out for themselves."

"Seriously why do you have such an issue with them? Their job is to protect, and have you seen them around Hawkins? They do their job. Especially Chief Hopper."

"Just - trust me, Diane. You got problems, they'll tell you to fuck off and deal with 'em at home, sweet home." There it was, that venom that tinged his words again and the constant fire that burnt like molten lava in his eyes resurfacing. Then he took several large gulps of his beer, depleting half of its contents in seconds.

Both Judith and Rob were getting up and Diane quickly turned her backs to them. She grabbed her beer and took another swig. Light flooded the room for a moment as they strode outside, not paying attention to the two teenagers in the corner.

Then they were shrouded back in the dimness of a bar that was too cheap to pay for more than four light bulbs. Even the brief contact to the outside world helped to clear some of the smoke out of the room.

The stranger sat all alone now, slowly finishing his drink as he stared at nothing in particular, lost in his own mind.

"I'm going to go over and talk with him." Diane said.

Billy looked her up and down. "Like that?"

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"You look more like you're gonna talk with him about the casket trade than whatever you're planning."

"I was planning on charming him. Then getting some information from him."

He looked at her coyly. "Dobler and charming don't go in the same sentence."



With a scowl she began pulling the sweater over the top of her head, then fluffing her hair out. She adjusted the tank top back into her skirt. "Just because I don't flirt with you doesn't mean I don't know how." She finished with a scowl. "You're just upset I won't be entertaining you."

Billy looked at her with appraisal, then smirked when he caught that rare look of utmost determination sparkling in her eyes. Then he held up his beer and tipped it slightly, in feigned permission towards the stranger.

She slid off the stool and made her way over to the stranger, almost lingering in the process. She had this. It wasn't like she didn't know how to act flirty or giggly. She had spent enough years with Tommy and the like to know exactly how it went down. Still, she was a little rusty.

Then she thought of the way Billy was probably staring at her with that infuriating smile of amusement behind her back.

"Pretty sure you're not a regular here." She said, a few feet away.

The man glanced up, and smiled as he drank her in. An interested high school girl right in front of him. He was in his thirties and it was clear the thought didn't deter him. "Pretty sure you shouldn't be a regular at all."

A slow smile began forming on her lips. Then she gave a light shrug. "Bartender operates on the same motto I do: age is just a number."

The stranger grinned, then gestured towards the seat. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple.

"It's only polite to introduce yourself." She teased.

He hummed, eyes flickering to her lips, lingering long enough to make his intention clear. "Let's skip the introductions."

"Okay, Stranger it is then." She toyed with the edges of a stray coaster. "How long are you in Hawkins for?"

"I was planning on skipping town tonight. But I might pay another

night for a room at the motel down the road." His rough, calloused hand went to rest on top of hers. His thumb brushed her wrist. There was a pale line on his otherwise tanned line where a wedding ring used to be. Beneath the light, his dark hair gleamed.

The blush that flared up was unavoidable at his directness. "I still don't even know your name."

"Makes it all the more exciting, doesn't it."

"You could be a serial killer. I mean, give me at least something to go by. Where do you work?"

He brows raised a fraction, slightly amused by her stubbornness. Bold enough to come into a rundown bar and go up to him, but not impulsive enough to take a chance on a stranger. "You ask a lot of questions."

"And you don't ask any at all."

Diane was desperate to get her hand back. The stranger had scooted closer, and his knee bumped with hers. "What if I already have the answer to my questions?"

She stared at him, lost for how to get back on track without raising suspicion.

He took her silence as a challenge. "Fine. How about you can ask me questions while we walk around for a bit."

"I'm guessing this scenic tour will take us towards the Motel?"

The stranger chuckled. "It might."

"Think she said she wasn't interested in going home with you." Billy said behind her, causing her to jump.

Cool eyes surveyed the stranger opposite him, and his arms were wound tight across his chest. Diane began standing up. "This isn't any of your business-"

And in one swift moment the stranger had pulled out a small pistol

and aimed it right at them, shrouded inside his jacket. From here, no one could see he was threatening them. Dark eyes stared at them, sharp with determination. If they moved, he would kill them. His finger played at the trigger.

"Take a seat." It wasn't a request.

Both stools scraped across the linoleum as they reluctantly sat down, never breaking eye contact with the tense stranger.

The stranger continued regarding them with feigned curiosity as he reached for his beer and took a few gulps, Adams apple bobbing. Carefully he set it back down on the faded Blue Ribbon coaster. Then the stranger raised his brows and gave them a small smile.

After years of working at this rundown establishment the bartender was well versed in peaking up unease in his bar. He shot the three of them a glare. "Whatever's happening break it off or I'm throwing you out. And no you can't take the damn drinks out with ya."

At the interruption of the bartender both of their eyes flickered up to stare at him. Come on, couldn't he see their plea through their eyes?

"Say anything and I'll shoot you before you can finish your sentence." The man said with a polite smile, revealing a row of even white teeth. Then he turned to look at the bartender. "Everything's fine."

Their eyes met for a moment, burning blue clashing with shocked grey, but she broke it off and looked at the gun again. It was small and sleek, occasionally catching the light from above along the cold edges of the weapon. Everything about the stranger from his finger ready to pull the trigger, to the way he sat spoke of someone with enough experience in the field. A shiver ran up her spine.

"This is all a misunderstanding-"

The stranger shook his head sharply and Diane fell silent.

For a moment the bartender scrutinised them, but after seeing only one smiling face next to two blank ones, he sighed and went back to drying the glasses.

"Who sent you?" The stranger asked, eyeing both of them.

"No one." Both Billy and her answered simultaneously. Billy's hand that lie on top of his jeans curled into a fist.

"Tell me what two underaged teens are doing here. Keep in mind I've had a busy day, and I don't have time to watch you kids fumble your way through a lie. I saw you staring at me from the moment you came in here." He gave her a pointed look.

In the corner of her eyes she saw Billy's eyes flicker down to the gun pointed directly at him now. He was the clearer threat with the devil-may-care look in his eyes and his muscular built fully angled on the man in front of him.

She knew she couldn't tell the stranger she recognise Judith or Rob. Somehow, she was sure that'd seal their fates instead. Whoever the stranger was, he wasn't working for the Energy department. Or anyone in their government. He couldn't, it wasn't protocol to threaten them like this.

A cool feeling replaced her fear as if she had been plunged into the ocean. Her vision sharpened and all external noise was tuned out. Her lie flowed out sweet as honey and the man eyes snapped over to her the moment she opened her mouth. "I've been flirting with you because I wanted to make Billy jealous. All I've seen him do it flirt and flirt with other girls like we're not together. And after all I've done for him? I mean," she dropped her voice to a whisper, "I might be a Christian but Jesus doesn't count the backdoor entra-"

"Shut up." The man interrupted her, looking regretful for asking. But his shoulders had relaxed a fraction and there wasn't the same determination in his eyes. "You're going to go back to your seats now, and any sudden movements, any cries for help, and you'll be lying on that floor. Am I clear?"

"Crystal." Billy said through gritted teeth.

As the man hastily slid his gun back into his holster and readjusted his jacket with one hand, clutching the tan folder in his other, a piece of paper slipped out as he stood up. His eyes swept over them one

last time, and he jerked his head towards the stools.

Billy stood up first and the man's eyes remained trained on him as both of them walked stiffly back to where they had previously sat.

Then second the man was out of the swinging door Billy turned sharply towards her. "You just had to go over there, didn't you?" His eyes were alight again with a fire that wanted to consume her too.

Her eyes flickered to where the man had been just moments before. "I didn't know."

"Yeah well maybe you fuckin' would've if you had taken the time to actually look at him instead of just throwing yourself at him."

"I didn't know!"

With every moment he seemed to move closer to her, and then put a hand on the edge of her stool and another on the table, cornering her in. "Well fuck. We both almost got shot because you *didn't know*. All because you want to go on some princess-y adventure and become a country bumpkin hero."

"What is wrong with you?" She tried leaning further away, but if she went any farther she'd fall off. "I don't want to play anything. And he wouldn't have tried anything if you didn't come charging at us like some maniac."

"News flash, Dobler. One of us was actually paying attention and saw he had a gun." He hissed. "What, you want to play some hero bullshit? What'd you think will happen? Hawkins will launch a pumpkin parade in your honour? You'll become Homecoming Queen?"

"I don't care about me." She snapped back at him.

There was that unreachable itch always in the back of her mind. If she could just do something, anything that was worthy of her parents' attention, then they'd come back. If she was right and there was a spy or a mole or traitor or whatever was going on, then she'd be supporting the same government her parents devoted their lives too. They'd finally come home.

"Well enlighten me." He said.

The walls were closing in around her, and in her periphery she kept seeing the dark, sleek weapon. Her chest tightened. She began struggling against him. "Move. I said move."

She wrestled away from him and dodged beneath his arm. Diane needed air. Desperately. Grabbing her sweater she stormed out of the bar and strode around the corner.

The scraggly weeds were fighting through the cement and the high unkempt grass was glistening with shards from beer bottles littered sporadically and trailing into the forest. She heard his hurried footsteps catching up with her.

"Hey I'm not done talkin' to you." He snapped.

"If all you're going to be is an ass telling me I deserved to get shot then I don't want to talk with you right now." She walked further into the grass, until it swayed around her shins.

"Ever thought I was trying to stop him from shooting you? Or were you too busy flirtin' with him to consider that?"

She whirled around, eyes wide and fearful. "I'm sorry. It was messed up, and I put you in danger and I know you're not ok-"

"I'm not some pussy scared of some government fuck with a gun." He hissed. He had taken her words as an accusation, like a threat that he wasn't strong enough. And he had to be crazy because being freaked out after what had happened just made him human. But God forbid Billy Hargrove was a normal mortal like the rest of them.

"Right I forgot you don't care about anything which is why you're flipping out at me right now."

"Why are you pushing this so hard?" He snarled. "This shit doesn't even involve you."

"Why am I? Why are you?" She cried, throwing her hands into the air.

"Hmm, let's see. If you die, then the police come to my house." His

smile was saccharine sweet.

"So you tell them you drove around with me because you wanted to get into my pants. Then I was an idiot who got shot by a stranger. Then they'll leave. What's the big deal?"

"I can't afford police coming by to my house."

"Why? Scared they'll trace back to what you did in California?"

He stepped forwards, towering over her. His voice was nothing but a raspy murmur. It was the smoke before the explosion. "And what do you know about it?"

Her chest rose and fell rapidly. But she stood her ground and glared up at him. "Just what the rumours say."

Cocking his head to the side slightly he stared at her unblinkingly. "Yeah and what's that?"

She didn't know why she didn't fear him in the way others did. By all means the muscles jutting from his jaw, and his imposing frame leaving her no room to move around in should have made her scared. "You killed someone."

He blinked. Then a small, sardonic smirk began growing on his lips. "Yet here you are."

"I don't believe it." She whispered. "But I think you did do something you don't want to talk about."

"Well shit, you really are Nancy Drew."

"You make it really hard to understand you when you refuse to tell me anything." She crossed her arms to steady them, feeling only the vestiges of adrenaline now leaving short bursts of trembling muscles.

"There's things that happen out in the world that pretty, privileged girls like you never deal with and don't understand."

They had begun so close their breaths were mingling. His pupils had exploded, nearly swallowing up his iris'. His breathing was ragged

and cheeks tinged red.

He lunged towards her and for a second she thought he was going to kiss her, throwing out all war raging inside of him right onto her lips. Instead his fingers gently dragged across her face, fingers going into the roots of her hair gently. There was nowhere else to look. "Don't ever try and protect me like that again."

Both of them were hurtling towards some unknown destination, and his emotions had only become as sharp and powerful as lightning striking anything in its vicinity. There was so much unsaid in his eyes that clashed with each other, emotions waging with each other to only result in chaotic explosions.

He released her suddenly and took a step back; Diane released the breathe she didn't know she'd been holding.

Her voice was heavy as she stared off past the trees to where she knew the white nondescript Energy building lay. It was on purpose she didn't reply to his command. Instead she said, "I have to tell them what happened."

"This is the last thing you do, or I'm throwing you in the trunk and driving you home." His words carried promise to fulfil his goal.

"Fine." She acquiesced. "But I'm done with this, okay? I already have no idea what's going on and I can't deal with you screaming at me and telling me I'm an idiot. So if I have to write a note saying I acted on my own just so the police don't come to your house, I will and I'll stick it on the dashboard too."

He blinked, as if taken aback by only realising now how he had acted. With a heavy sigh he gave her a small nod in acknowledgement. His eyes flickered to the scraggly grass popping up around their feet. She swore she had seen a flicker of remorse, but it was too quick to process as his lashes swept against his cheeks.

After a moment she heard him follow her to the car.

They drove in silence through the backroads. Neither had bothered touching the radio and only the low purr of the engine could be



heard.

Night had fallen, and the only source of light was from her car, illuminating the road ahead. Not even the trees were stirring now as she got closer to the facility. Diane didn't realise how tense she had been inside the bar until her ache in her muscles began growing. She shifted restlessly in the car seat.

Ignoring Billy's baffling suspicion towards law enforcement, she told herself she'd go to the police department tomorrow if she didn't understand whatever was happening by tonight.

Neither of them realised the path they had put themselves on by pursuing this lead. Or else they likely both would've turned back and never spoken about it again.

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**When in doubt, it's always the Russians according to the Stranger Things survival handbook.**

**Caarehme:** I wrote this story before ST3 was out + with the introduction of an OC, I can at least tell you the ending of this story will be different from the one we've just seen (luckily, I don't think my heart could take it otherwise.)

**Guest:** Thanks! I'm trying my best to give him some (positive) character growth while keeping him true to his sardonic, slightly douchebag-y self. He gets nicer though I promise.

**Ami:** Me too. I was expecting it, but hoping against it. I would've loved to see his ST4 story arc. His past actions were understandable, but not justifiable and he's such an awesomely complex character imo. At this point I'm so upset I might just end up writing a short non-romantic fic about him grappling with his identity post Mind Flayer to get it out of my system. At least this story has some Billy POV's coming up.

## 11. Chapter Eleven: Surprising Drop-In

The drive continued in silence and she was getting a little antsy now. It felt odd to continue the drive with neither chatting - or bickering - or listening to the radio. As she came to the top of first of three hills to their destination, she could see the Energy Departments light littering the building just a mile ahead.

"So what are you doing after this?" She asked conversationally, thought it sound strained to her own ears.

"After what?" He muttered.

"School, you're graduating this year."

He didn't answer for so long she didn't think Billy had heard her. Finally he said, "keep your little detective skills focused on your irrational mission."

He was brooding, like he had never thought of what he wanted to after he graduated. She frowned. Everyone thought of what they were going to do after graduation. How had he not thought of what he was going to do after afterwards?

It was a perfectly normal question to ask.

"You've almost gotten us killed and you're chasing after something even more imaginary than someone on acid chasing after a dragon." Billy said with a surprisingly calm tone. "And I know you're not an idiot like the rest at the sorry excuse that's Hawkins High."

Maybe that's what he had been brooding about.

Her heart was only thrumming gently now. But it had still shaken her, inside. No one had ever pointed a gun at her, or at anyone she was with. Both of them had nearly been shot. Because she was so focused on solving this case.

And he was right. What was important enough that she wasn't just risking her life, but his too? What had she even really found? With a sigh she slowed down, and then pulled over to the side of the road.

Not that there was much point. The only thing out here was the energy facility and she doubted it was a popular road. Still, it was the safe thing to do. Though she snorted at her own irony she'd get herself into a situation with a deadly weapon but staying on the road felt too risky.

The engine stilled as she turned the key. Diane sat back in her seat. It felt like his eyes were going to burn through her with the relentless way he was analysing her right now. She didn't know what she was showing him without talking.

Billy took off his seatbelt and Diane mimicked him.

"Was it true? What you said about being worried about the police coming to your place?" She asked, playing with her hands in a tentative manner.

"Yeah. It is."

"And we almost got shot." She fiddled with the edge of her sleeve.

"Sure did." His words were whip sharp.

"I'm sorry. Okay, fine, you were right. I've been acting sort of, uhm, driven?" She tried to phrase it neutrality.

Diane trusted the police, but he clearly didn't. And she'd been dragging him everywhere with her. No, not *dragging*, he'd rejected her offer to drop him off. If she was in that much danger he could've called the police on her from a pay booth; she wasn't doing anything illegal but it'd sure get the point across to her.

Hadn't he also said he was just here for the ride and subsequent entertainment of her failure? The thought slipped away before she could hold onto it.

He narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to say something before deciding that there would be no justice in any response he could possibly have.

She couldn't believe the amalgamation of events that had lead her up to this moment: sitting in a car with Mr. California about to confess a

startling revelation she had finally accepted about herself.

She was fairly sure she had stumbled into a parallel universe without realising it. Figures. With a shaky sigh she looked out the window.

"I just thought- . . . you think life is better without any parents, which is easy to say when you can come home to at least someone. The grades didn't do it, and the spotless record didn't do it, and the academic awards didn't do it. You know I used to be friends with Carol and Tommy and the like?" She breathed a laugh, "He used to have such a crush on me."

Billy sniffed. "Yeah, think he's still pining of you; waste of time, you're too good for him."

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes at his words, but she was still looking out the window, too lost in her own mind to see the serious expression on his face. "But they wanted to use my empty house for parties. My parents would still visit every now and then. By the time I was fifteen though, they barely came around.

Carol was so insistent; gave an ultimatum. Either I was their friend, or I should find new ones who liked playing stupid, nerdy games. And I just couldn't do it. If they came home one night when the whole house had turned into a rager complete with graffiti and low ply toilet paper thrown everywhere?

They would've told me they had expected better of me, to act like an adult and how irresponsible I was - how disappointed they'd be. Then they'd just pack up and never come back." Diane was playing with her hands the whole time as she stared at her lap.

"Should we put a pin in the fact that you emphasized the worst thing your parents would walk home to is *low ply* toilet paper?" He asked with a raised brow.

Finally she looked over at him and she couldn't believe he had tugged a small smile out of her when she felt so leaden with the stress of the conversation. Suddenly it felt like the blood in her veins had livened up again. "I stepped away from their circle after that. Never missed me, and the feeling's mutual. Guess they're more your type of people.

And I just thought, if I showed them I could already do this before I even finished high school, they'd realise that I'm good enough to tag along their work-trips. They'd teach me how to do what they do. The Energy Department would realise I'm smart enough to do this. But I don't know if my parents are coming back."

"You say all that now, but trust me the whole coming home to your parents thing ain't that fucking thrilling." He drawled, running a hand through his curls. "And I don't do friends."

He looked bored, a little frustrated even by the way his tapping against the floor.

Her voice was quiet, "Being nice isn't going to hurt you, you know. Or at least, I won't."

The last part spilled out before she could even think it through. Diane didn't know why she said it. It wasn't like Billy Hargrove got hurt, at least not emotionally. Hell, sometimes she doubted if he even felt physical pain.

There was an intense look in his eye that she couldn't decipher, nearly like her offer got through him to a certain extent, but then was blocked somewhere inside his brain from continuing towards understanding or accepting them. With a shrug Billy made a noncommittal sound.

A heavy sigh passed through her lips and she slowly began nodding with defeated acceptance. "We'll go back. I won't even drag you on any stupid follow-ups either. And it's fine," she said more for herself, "There's other things I can do better, maybe intern at the mayors or something this summer. I'm better at paperwork anyway."

She would still go to the police herself tomorrow, though. Tell them what happened with the gun, at least. She'd just leave Billy out of the story.

He snorted and looked out the window.

"What?" She asked. He hadn't made fun of her the entire time like she thought he would. Well, okay, he had made fun of her. But he

could've been mean-spirited. After what she did, she wouldn't argue that she didn't deserve some harshness thrown her way.

Billy almost seemed over it now, but Diane probably wouldn't be for a while.

"If you were this stubborn about doing the things you wanted to, instead of what your parents keep wanting, imagine how free you'd feel." He said.

"And does it make you feel free?" She asked. Diane didn't have to know his home life to know half of what he did had to be behind their backs.

A dark look clouded his eyes for a moment before they cleared up again as one thought was pushed out of his head and another sprang up.

It was one of his whiplash moods again where she knew she'd always be a few moments behind. The conversation they just had was already nothing more than something behind them on the road. With his next words she knew the exact reasoning for that growing look of mischief on his face.

Diane turned around slightly in the seat to face him better, raising up her knee to be near the gear shift.

He grinned. "Jesus' loophole? You're sick, Dobler."

Her face heated up. "I had to make up something believable."

"Well I think he bought it. Hell I almost did."

"Jesus." She grumbled, then she opened her mouth and closed it. She hadn't mean it like *that*. If he kept going she was sure her face could sear a steak.

"Freudian slip? Tell me, do crosses get you too?" He murmured, and his demeanour had effortlessly shifted into a territory that he wasn't only natural at, but excelled in.

She slid further down into her seat with another grumble. "You can

take me up on that offer to throw me in the trunk now."

"Oh that's how it begins, is it." His eyes were sparkling with mischief at her increasing discomfort.

A certain hunger darkened his eyes and the atmosphere in the car transformed from something light into an allure that saturated the confined space. It carried with it an electric undercurrent that jolted her nerves.

A smaller smile was playing on his lips now as he leaned forwards slightly, encroaching into her space. But with his broad shoulders and muscular frame inside the narrow car that wasn't difficult to do. His presence was inescapable.

His hand was on his knee, and the heat from his calloused fingers instant instantly seeped through the long skirt.

"That might've been a lie back in the bar, but everyone has a fantasy. What's yours?" His thumb brushed the inside of her knee.

And she was in a small car with nowhere to go and his dominating energy was all around her, trapping her right there in the car with him. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

In the back of her mind she knew she was one of many girls he used these tricks on, but he was so good at it, and she was only human. His tongue darted out to swipe his lower lip nearly-unconsciously.

He was so close now their breaths mingled; she realised she had moved closer too suddenly, like a magnet unable to fight the current. The heady scent of his cologne surrounded her, and even the slight spiced scent that was rising through the base of the cologne sent a small shiver up her spine.

"Tell me what you want, Diane." His head was tilted slightly, words nearly brushing against her lips as he murmured. Her eyes began lulling shut as her heart was thrumming in her chest.

Denim from the sleeve of his jacket brushed against her collarbone as his hand rose up to slide to the back of her head. His demeanour was nearly physical with intent and it ensnared her.

And-

No. Something was wrong. Her eyes sprang open. That was a much stronger flutter and it wasn't a nervously happy one. The anxiety spread through her like something had finally snapped inside her, and she pulled with a jerk saying, "I can't right now."

His eyes flashed in suspicion but it instantly morphed into concern when he saw the deep unease in her face. Diane didn't even realise she had reached out to him and rested her hand on her arm until her eyes flickered down. "I don't feel good." The words tumbled out of her mouth. "I think it's the pills. I haven't been taking them, I need to go back home. Now."

"What pills?"

"The ones I've taken since I was little every single day since forever." She said. She had expected frustration from him, a snippy attitude, to push her. Tommy would've. Most of the boys she knew would've.

"Yeah what are they about? Because if you're going to stop breathin' while driving, well I'd rather not go bending around a tree." His words came out quickly.

She shook her head quickly. "Anxiety. I think."

"You *think*?" His brows flash up into his hairline as he took in the way she was now clutching his arm and had paled with a sudden spike in stress levels. "It either is or it isn't."

"My mom explained it years ago, I never really bothered to ask again." She defended. But maybe she should've. Going off the pills was giving her a sense of unease that almost felt physical in nature, like a shift in her cells.

So this is why her mom and dad had drilled into her to take them daily. And she had like clockwork every day until the process began so engrained in her morning routine she barely even thought of it anymore. Or at least she had, until about about two weeks ago.

Billy had done more than show up at Hawkins with his obnoxiously loud Camaro; he had metaphorically crashed into her life.



"You're the reason I've forgotten to take my pills." She accused.

"Some girls just go crazy when they kiss me but it's a risk I'm willing to take." He looked very insincerely remorseful. In fact that looked like the ghost of a smirk.

Another smiling was threatening to pull her lips upwards despite herself. For a moment their eyes met and they stared at each other in lazy amusement.

There was a thud on top of the car hood that rocked them forwards.

"What the fuck is that thing?!" Billy leaned all the way back in the seat as he stared upwards; he was blinking several times as his mind was forced to accept a previously unattainable logic.

It looked like a cougar and Great Dane had bred together, had its skin flayed, and then thrown into a cooler for a few too many years. The things head whipped towards them. Then it began opening its mouth like petals sliding open.

She had nearly managed to rationalise that they really had seen a rabid or diseased animal. But this was not an animal. Nothing about it was natural and a shudder rippled through her.

Rings of short, sharp teeth glistened with rows of saliva dripping downwards. A keening shriek was thrown right into their faces, barely muted by the glass barrier between them.

"Go, go, go." Billy snarled never once taking his eyes off the demon-dog. It reared back on its hind legs before throwing its full weight down; a crack shot up the middle of the windshield and the car rocked again.

A frustrated whimper made its way out of her throat as she fumbled with the keys. And then he knocked her hand aside and jammed the key in, twisting it.

"Hit it!" He ordered.

The engine roared to life and they were thrown back in their seats as Diane hit the pedal all the way to the ground. The demon-dog went

rolling over the windshield, over the top of the car and was thrown behind them.

For a split second she glanced in the rearview mirror as she saw the thing tumble onto the dark ground of the road. Without seeming to take any damage at all it jumped up again, shook itself off and then stared directly at the retreating car.

Then it bounded towards them and Diane's eyes snapped back to the road as she stared hard ahead. The yellow stripes on the road were nothing but a blur.

The world came sharply into focus again as the adrenaline spiked in her system and the gated Energy Department drew nearer. This close she could see that there was only one entry checkpoint that the road lead up too. Squinting slightly she made out three guards.

One appeared to be in the booth.

"You need to slow down." Billy muttered, holding onto the side of the car as he realised the quickly diminishing distance and her incredible speed.

But Diane couldn't shake the feeling of that thing running after them was close behind and ready to tear into the car. She couldn't slow down yet. They had to get a little closer. Her heart was pounding and blood roared in her ears.

Just a little closer . . . She could make out the yellow and black warning band on the top of the divider pole. Beneath it was a speed bump. Getting inside the building was the safest option; she would get them as close as possible.

"Diane." He roared.

She slammed on the breaks and gave a small shriek as the car skidded forwards. Both grunted simultaneously as the car forcefully slammed into the speed-bump, then the front hit the metal pole as they were thrown forwards in their seats.

The airbags shot up as they were yanked forwards. The world blinked out for a moment. As she stirred the first thing that began coming

was sound. There were muffled noises from outside that sounded like she was listening from the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

Then the flickering lights of the Department twinkled like large, blurry snowflakes before her vision adjusted and they returned to sharp small lights.

As both of them struggled to sit up, they saw the guards pouring down from the facility. Behind them, a large black car had pulled up, blocking any exit if it crossed their minds. A moment later a well-dressed man with slicked back pepper hair stepped out of the passengers seat.

A few guards had approached them now. The teens winced as powerful flashlights were shone into their faces. Their wide eyes stared back owlshly at the department employees closing in on them.

The man with the grey jacket on and a tailored suit stepped forwards. Smiling at Diane he wriggled his leather-gloved fingers at her in semblance of a wave.

"You should have called before you came. We didn't expect to see you back. Welcome," the man smiled tightly, "Ms. Dobler."

Back? What did he mean back, she had never been inside the Energy Department before. And how did a man she had never seen in her life automatically realise it was her, sitting here in the chaos of a crashed car, hair a birds nest and face large and pale after the demon-dog attack?

Diane and Billy stared at the officials gathering around them with wide eyes and nowhere else to go.

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**A/N:** Cock-blocked by a demodog. We get it, the Mind Flayer wants Billy all to itself.

Billy's jokes about the demodogs being dipped/from the Chernobyl reactor in earlier chapters. But I need to go back and delete those jokes because they're a few years before their time. (If only I had thoroughly edited this story instead of being lazy).

These were some long replies to your reviews below. I'll do my best to keep my replies shorter so I don't falsely inflate the word count on the story too much.

**GreenBanshee:** Well cat's out of the bag, you got me. I know nothing about cars. But thanks for the corrections, I'll go back and fix the errors and play more with the dialogue between them when I get the time to edit.

**Cosmo39:** I think they just need to make an alternative ST3 ending where we see that no one died, they all just went to live on a farm together.

"Has anyone seen Hopper recently?" "Oh he went to go live on a farm."

**Guest:** I don't even know how that happened. Somehow her character weaselled her way into acting more naive than originally intended. Although right now I think its partially wilful ignorance mixed with desperation to get her parents approval. Unlike most of them she didn't grow up with her parents so seeing their flaws is harder (you know, excluding the fact they pretty much abandoned her). And since Billy's a relentless pusher he's been forcing her to question her identity and values like she'll be/is doing with him.

But she's about to get her world turned upside-down (heh) soon, which'll speed along her character development. Nothing like a few earth-shattering revelations to change ones mindset.

**Tulipei1:** I did translate it, but it's absolutely no issue! I think it's super impressive that you've taken the time to learn another language and read stories in English since it's not your native language. If you need anything clarified at any point just let me know.

I've been trying to keep this story with some lightness and humour in it for sure since the show has a good mix of humour and angst. I debated making a darker character for him, but I was afraid there'd be too much angst and felt like I'd have a funner time writing this if I tried throwing in a character who's someone he'd never hang out with if it weren't by accident.

**Belovedfinch11:** Feel like there should've been more Max and Billy scenes thrown in there before the ending (make it happen, ST4!), only because I wanted at least a little cuteness between them in their complex relationship, seeing as they clearly both loved each other.

**Sandafairy:** Diane just needs to keep getting some confidence to feel she has the right to throw quips left and right and dead-center at demogorgans.

**MulishaMaiden:** Ask and yee shall receive. Thanks for the compliments, I even read them twice. We can cry together! I didn't feel particularly attached in ST3, just interested. But trust the writers and the actor who killed it this season to make another asshole character amazing by the end.

Honestly I would've loved in ST4 if he still carries part of his old personality mixed with the goodness inside of him. Like he gets pulled into their shenanigans only because, and he'd make that *very* clear, he loves his sister and grudgingly cares for El - but the rest are a nuisance at best. Plus watching Billy and Steve bitching at each other as they work to protect the kids together would've been hilarious.

**CosmicWonder20:** we're all just healing together

**Ami:** I read a really nice quote some more insightful human than me left on the internet a few days ago, which was something along the lines of 'he was alone his entire life and he died alone'. I especially love they didn't use his abusive upbringing to justify his behaviour (looking at you 50 Shades). Acting both Billy and the Mind Flayer at once was insane. I can't even act sober when I'm drunk and he can do 2 character simultaneously? Give him every award.

The cop distrust in the story will be fleshed out more. Also I just posted the first chapter for Billy-centric oneshots between growing up and recovering from the Mind Flayer called Grey Matter. :)

**Emilym6280:** He definitely will soon, they'll be forced into a situation together that becomes a huge stepping stone in the right direction for their relationship

## 12. Chapter Twelve: Cell

She never expected she'd be several floors underground in a government facility that looked more like a clinical hospital than a boring office building with Billy Hargrove, of all people to be stuck in a cell with. And she never expected to feel relief that it was with him she was stuck with. There was something about him that had become a comfort to her, no matter how dire their situation may be now.

Still, even Billy couldn't temper this feeling of unease that was felt so deep it chilled her to her bones. For the most part literally.

With the amount she was pacing back and forth in the small cell she'd wear down the white-tiled floor in no time. Her shadow was thrown against the hallway wall, scattering as the light was systematically broken by the metal bars acting as a barrier to their freedom.

Meanwhile Billy was lying on the only small, metallic cot against the wall, one leg slung off the side. His arms were laced behind his head. It was so narrow his one arm was pressed up against the wall, elbowing pointing towards the ceiling. His breathing was deep and calm to the point she wasn't sure if he had genuinely fallen asleep.

"Can you quit your pacing? I'm tryin' to relax here." He sighed.

Diane paused for a moment. "We are in a cell. Underground. And no one knows we're here."

"That's not true."

She whirled around in surprise, feeling the hope flare up within her. "It's not?"

"Your fellow patriotic and loyal government employees know we're here." He answered breezily.

Her hands itched for something to throw at knock away that infuriatingly sardonic demeanour. Instead she let out a growl of frustration. His lip twitched which only incited her further. What

drove him to act so callous, she wasn't sure.

For a moment Diane scrutinised him. There had to be something, some tale he wasn't as calm as he let on at the moment. It had been him after all who had gripped the bars of the cell first and yelled at the retreating figures of the soldiers to tell them what the fuck was going on.

Then he had yelled a series of derogatory remarks at their retreating back before slamming his palms against the bars in frustration and storming over to the cot.

For a while he had glared at the floor, simmering with anger. Then something had flipped in his brain and his expression had turned cold, before he had eased himself onto his back. Now there he lay, looking like he was on in a hammock on a beach. Instead of behind bars as they waited to find out what was going to happen with them next.

"I know you're new to this whole thing, but it's creepy to stare at people sleeping." He said, eyes still closed.

"Oh will you shut up." She snapped, before turning around and staring at the bars on the cell again.

The hair on the back of her neck standing up, and it had been since they got out of the car. As soon as she had set foot in the building with all its white impersonal walls and floors, goosebumps had rippled across her arms like a chill draft had swept through the hallway. Except it was warmer inside; her reaction was contradictory and she didn't know what was wrong with her.

"We're going to die here. A mile underground, in some military bunker and no one knows we're here." She said, words spilling out quickly and wrangled with nerves.

"If they wanted to kill us they already would've." He opened one eye to look at her.

"Oh great. So they haven't killed us yet. So they're just toying with us then."

"Settle down, I feel like I'm running a marathon just looking at you."

"I just - I can't. Something's wrong. Something's not right with this place. It's like-" she sighed heavily, running her hands through her hair.

It was with every fibre of her being that something just felt wrong. Like some anomaly in the universe was creeping around the shadows of this facility. It made her skin crawl.

It was more than fear of the consequences of crashing into the Department, and it was more than the nervousness of their still uncertain situation. But she didn't even know how to begin articulating her feelings of wrongness.

"Don't you feel it?" Her eyes glanced out at the empty hallway. "Like we're sitting ducks. And the prey's arriving soon."

With a groan he heaved himself up into a sitting position and stared at her. Her hands curled around the bars and she gave them a futile tug.

"Nearly got it Charlie's Angel, one more yank'll do it." He said.

Diane leaned her against one of the bars, fighting back a groan of despair. Trying to pull at the bars was a move beyond desperation. There wasn't exactly a plan to get through all those guards patrolling the building even if she had managed to pull the bars off. Her shoulders sank as acceptance began taking hold of her.

She whispered, "So now we know that thing back there was definitely not a canine."

"We don't know what it was." Like giving it an explicit name was going to change the slow-kindling terror of what they had felt upon seeing it up close for the first time.

Diane breathed a laugh devoid of amusement. "It wasn't natural."

"Still looks like it could be hit by a baseball bat." He said.

His own careless attitude didn't soothe her in the slightest. No matter



how she tried to rationalise it this time, there was no way around it: that thing wasn't natural, and it was a truth that seemed to bleed into her cells.

"Okay well I'm scared." She said, finally turning around her eyes piercing him with the truth. She wasn't just scared, she was terrified.

His eyes softened.

A bruise was blossoming along her eye and Billy had one developing on his forehead right by his hairline. They looked like they were in the process of being dragged into hell.

But of course against all odds, he managed to pull that look off gracefully, looking like he was leading that chariot straight to hell with devilish charm. Diane was fairly sure she looked like something a suspicious neighbour would call the police about, or at this point any citizen interested in upholding the law in Hawkins.

"Well you managed to drive decently. Up until you didn't." He said. And another smile was suddenly pulled forwards in a situation that she'd only be serious in, yet he had an effortless way of twisting their situations into more carefree ones. "When we get out of here, I think I'll driving back."

*When.* Her heart fluttered. "*When* we do, the car is all yours."

"I did tell you you should let me drive." His own unease at the uncertainty of their situation was hidden by the veneer of humour in his eyes; he was trying to calm her through his own nonchalance. Because if he could fake it well enough to convince Diane, maybe he'd begin believing it himself.

First he was accompanying her for reasons she didn't know; then it was about the entertainment he watched her brazenly try and solve this mystery; and then it was about keeping himself off the police's radar. His reasons for being around her was perpetually shifting.

She realised he presented his life like a kaleidoscope, fractures of images showing girls and partying and booze and cars. All of them were vividly colourful and dripping with scandal. But besides Max,

he never spoke of his home life. She didn't know anything about California. She didn't even know what he wanted to do after graduation, even though she had asked him only hours ago.

In fact, come to think of it, she barely *knew* Billy Hargrove. For someone who so easily accused her of hiding herself from everyone, she was starting to wonder if he were doing the same. If she were hiding herself behind dark clothes and books, then he was shrouding himself in colourful illusions bursting with outrageous behaviour.

She was distracted from ruminating about him as her stomach did another flip. Being down here for so long was only making her body go more haywire. Small shivers began wracking through her body like she had stepped foot into the cool shadows after standing beneath the sun during a warm summer day.

Standing up he began shrugging out of his jacket as he walked over to her. He slung the denim jacket around her shoulders easily. His body heat still clung to the jacket and seeped into her own. It fought against the deeper chill and she relaxed automatically inside it.

His now familiar scent embraced her, giving her something to ground her within the chaos of whatever was happening.

"Imagine what your parents will think if I had you out all night and brought you back home with a cold." He admonished.

"My parents will kill me." She groaned quietly, careful to make sure no one outside could hear them.

"They sound great." He jeered.

Diane scowled at him, feeling the automatic need to defend her parents. He didn't know them. He couldn't judge what they did. "They are. They've fed me, and I've gotten all the books I've wanted. They're even paying for university."

"Yeah the hallmark of good child-rearing is just not raisin' your kid in a basement." He said with narrowed eyes.

"My mom and my dad are good people. When they're here, it's good, alright? We make dinner together and we listen to Motown. And they

always try their best to make sure I have what I need."

"And who're you trying to convince?" His own voice was low as he seemed to be on the same track she was: there were probably microphones in here and neither wanted to be overheard. "You lost all your friends just because you were so sure they'd disown you for you know, being a high schooler."

And by the glint in his eye like he pitied her only hardened her stubborn expression. "They're only angry at me when I'm causing problems."

"Bet they keep finding problems." There was a stubborn edge to his tone as he seemed keen on drawing out reactions of indignation from her. Or perhaps it was something else entirely he was after.

She opened her mouth to retort, but realised their heated exchange had raised their voices away from their furious whispering.

Both of their arguments tapered off into silence. With an unspoken look passed between them they agreed to drop the argument before their voices rose too much. It wasn't important enough to discuss now and they were both too distracted, evidenced in the way his eyes kept flickering towards the hallway as well.

As he stepped back and looked at the jacket that hung over her frame there was a shift of something in his eyes that became magnetic, drawing her in. For a moment Diane was enraptured, trying to understand it. But his mask of sardonic apathy slid back into place and he gave a light shrug coupled with a noncommittal sound. "I still look better in it."

"It's pretty hard to compete with you." She said sarcastically, though some truth bled in there.

Then he reached out, readjusting the jacket slightly. But she was fairly sure it wasn't just because he didn't think it fit right on her; there was no way she was broad shouldered enough to fill it out no matter how he readjusted it.

The back of his hand brushed against her neck, moving upwards to

her shone through his eyes, and for a moment she truly believed they would get out of here both alive and unscathed.

"Hey - hey! No touching!" A guard yelled down the hallway. At least one person was keeping an eye out for the CCTV camera in the cell, then.

They sprung apart.

"Sorry." Diane said reflexively and Billy raised a brow at her in response. She wasn't even going to try and defend herself because it would be an uphill battle she didn't have the focus for.

For an indiscernible amount of time they walked around the small cell, shifting from leaning against the walls or sitting on the cot restlessly. Time was passing at a glacial pace. Several times she peered at his watch.

10:54

10:56

10:59

11:01

11:03

A door slammed down the hallway and both of their heads snapped up at the sound. Footsteps grew louder the closer they got to Diane and Billy's holding cell.

Two guards appeared, accompanied by a man in a white lab coat who eyed both of them with a detached curiosity. Again, another employee she had never seen before in her life. Diane never knew so many people worked here. Then again, she didn't know they had prison cells in a building oddly clinical for being a bureaucratic government building.

The man gave a short gesture with his hand and a guard stepped forwards, the silver ring of keys clinking together. Then he slid the door opened; the bars rattled as they went.

"Come with me. It's time we had a chat."

There was no other option than to cross the threshold that'd bring them towards what looked to be an oncoming interrogation. She glanced back at Billy who was sneering at the guards with fire blazing his eyes. It surprised her, the way he could flip a switch so quickly. There were two ways he presented himself, and soft surprise filtered through as the memories of him being so imposing had slid away the second his face had softened and he spoken gently to her.

It wasn't an aspect she thought he was capable of, yet it sprung from him so naturally. It was like weed growing through the cracks, breathing fresh life through him despite his hardened exterior.

But it was impossible to forget about how intimidating he could present himself to be when he was staring at the guard like he was ready to beat him black and blue, and maybe even go further.

Now there was nothing for them to do but take one step at a time. Literally, and figuratively. Until the truths they offered tonight threw her off the cliff of normality.

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**Tulipei1:** No one can do that mans lifeguard job. Who's going to be yelling 'hey lardass!' at kids running around the pool now? Thanks so much for the compliments. My goal is to keep veering the story away from the original plot as this progresses and Diane continues influencing the events around her. It's great how he got all protective and possibly blocked her from gathering any sort of information on the transaction that happens between him and Rob and Judith. Now if he could just properly articulate that he was concerned for her instead of getting all uppity.

Diane in the front trying to calmly and kindly collect information from someone while you see Billy mowing down perps in the background. Diane, Billy and Max could really become a great and terrifying triple threat. And as for Steve, Billy and him may have a run-in at some point ;)

**MulishaMaiden:** It's going to be revealed soon why she doesn't remember being there. You may be on to something, but I won't spill

secrets before the chapter's out. Liking the theory though.

Character progression in ST is great. Actually that could be a good reason they decided to just kill him off. There'd need to be an entire season just dedicated to his recovery because I'm pretty sure he'd be absolutely emotionally wrecked for an entire season if they're keeping the show within their usual natural character growth. But those missed Steve-Billy bickering scene though. . .

**Evilmonkeyfishturtle:** Diane is a pretty great OC (the writer said without bias), and it's been pretty fun playing with her in the ST universe and how she impacts the events of the story which'll continue being more evident as it progresses. Honestly I think slowburn is the only way to go with Billy's character, protecting himself as been so deeply entrenched in his psyche for years that boy has mental walls a mile high. You're English was nearly perfect so no need to apologise :)

**ReidsLittleGenius213:** The cover of the book will be Billy yelling at kids and rampantly abusing his lifeguard position.

**Ami, toobsessedwitheverything3** thanks for the reviews!

### 13. Chapter Thirteen: Interrogation

They walked further down the unwelcoming hallways of the Energy Department, getting lost in the underground maze. The walk towards their unknown destination was painfully silent, forcibly following the guards and scientist. Occasionally a shoe would squeak against the linoleum white floor, breaking the silence.

Finally they reached the end of a hallway. The guards stood with rigid backs on opposite sides of the door, looking straight ahead. With a welcoming gesture the scientist lead them into the white room. Billy's eyes flickered around the room, taking in everything as his jaw was tight in defence.

The only colour that broke the whiteness was a metal table and three chairs. Two for them on one side, and one of the scientist across from them. Adjacent was a long mirror, and Diane had a strong feeling it was two-way.

As the scientist slid in nodded for them to sit. While Diane moved forwards reluctantly, Billy dragged the chair out and swung his legs across, giving the scientist a defiant look.

They stared right into the pale, sullen face of the scientist. The metal table which smelled faintly of bleach was all that separated them. Above, the sharp light whined. In front of the scientist was a manila envelope, and to his right as a black bulky recording device.

The scientists watery blue eyes regarded them shrewdly.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mr. Ingraham, a scientist for the U.S Government." He said.

The words spilled out of her quickly, trying to appease the cold man. "Mr. Ingraham, I'm Diane Dobler. You might know my parents - they work here. I'm so sorry about crashing into your fence but this is just a misunderstanding and I'll pay for any damages to the government property."

"Yes," Mr. Ingraham readjusted his spectacles that perched on his

hook nose, "I am quite aware of the situation."

Something in his tone implied he was far more knowledgeable about how they had crashed into the Energy Department in the first place. Billy and Diane shared a glance.

Mr. Ingraham gave both of them a tight smile. "Shall we begin?" He reached over and pressed a button on the recorder; a red light sprang to life.

"Yeah, how about we fucking do. Few questions I want answered." Billy said sharply.

"You have an objection?" Mr. Ingraham said, looking completely unfazed.

"Sort of." He sniffed. "Something about this whole forcing two kids into a fuckin' cell and then interrogating them strikes me as a little - oh, I don't know, *weird*."

Mr. Ingraham's eyes flashed to Billy; his expression was impenetrable. If Billy was getting a rise out of him, or if he even felt the thrill of intimidation, he didn't show it. Instead he continued to stare at Billy with faint curiosity, as if he just another experiment he was analysing.

After a long drawn out moment Billy narrowed his eyes. "Nothing to say, Doc?"

Finally Mr. Ingraham's eyes flitted down to the envelope in front of him. With a hum he reached inside and pulled out a piece of paper. "You must be Mr. Hargrove."

One bushy brow rose. "Managed to deduce that all by yourself, did you."

If Billy was concerned the state employee already knew his name, he didn't show it.

Mr. Ingraham casually dipped into his coat pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, dabbing beneath his nose before tucking it back. Then he continued, "Your anger is understandable. It must be



tough, moving to another state so suddenly."

"I get by." His lip twitched, threatening to pull into a sneer.

"Mmm, yes. You certainly do. In Indiana. Not much on your records here. But of course, in California, that is a different story, isn't it, Mr. Hargrove?" His continued speaking in a soft tone.

Billy stiffened at his words and his jaw tightened. "Well in California we don't have unnatural killer animals going after the local population. So yeah, I'd say it's a different story."

If Mr. Ingraham was surprised about the animals, or at all concerned about their well-being, it was impossible to tell. The look of detached interest was constant. Whatever they said, she was beginning to realise now wouldn't rattle him in the slightest. Suddenly she felt like a lab-rat on the other side of the cage.

"Mmm," he licked his thumb before turning the page and eyes scanned it as if he didn't already know what was stated, "An interesting ongoing case here, involving you, Mr. Hargrove, and your sister Maxine Hargrove. Not to mention Nei-"

"What do you want?" Billy snarled, surging forwards in his seat and slammed his arms onto the table. His chest rose and fell with the surge of fury that had exploded within.

Mr. Ingraham didn't blink. After a moment, his lip twitched as if fending of a coy smile. "We're not here to open up any investigations into you, as we have other more pressings matters to attend to. If you would like to be a priority, however, that can be arranged."

Billy's entire body tensed as the threat from Mr. Ingraham sank in. Anyone else on the receiving end of his glower would have been too intimidated to utter a word, but Mr. Ingraham wasn't like anyone she'd ever met before.

"Yeah I fuckin' got it." Billy sneered, arms crossed tightly across his chest as he leaned back in his seat like he was trying to distance himself as much as possible from Mr. Ingraham.

Then Mr. Ingraham leaned back, and fished a carton of Lucky Strike

out of his pocket before sliding them onto the middle of the table. He gestured towards them. Without lifting a finger, Mr. Ingraham had ensured that Billy knew he wasn't the one in charge here; the moment he had stepped through the Departments door he had already been collared and placed on a tight leash.

Diane shook her head. Billy accepted one without hesitation. He lit the cigarette, then pocketed the scientists lighter. It was the only act of defiance he had left, and Mr. Ingraham let it slide.

Then the scientist turned his attention towards Diane. "So you admit you trespassed on private government property?" Mr. Ingraham asked.

"I mean-"

"Yes or no answers, please."

"Well, yes." Her pulse was beginning to jump up. This wasn't the way this was supposed to go.

"And you admit to you lied to governmental officials regarding your initial statement of events at Hawkins High?" Mr. Ingraham asked.

She opened her mouth to protest, then snapped it shut. With a heavy sigh she gave a short nod.

"Verbally, please."

"Yes." She answered through gritted teeth.

"You were also stalking and harassing government employees." He stated.

Diane blanched. Her heart was hammering against her ribs. Her eyes slid down to the metal table. "Yes." The admission was small and weak.

"You aren't going to ask me anything? Where I was, what I was doing, my horoscope sign." Billy threw in, arms folded tightly across his chest.

He had become more subdued, but his anger was still simmering beneath the surface. If anything he reminded her of a caged tiger stalking around in its cell waiting for an opportunity to strike.

"We are already aware of your activities." Mr. Ingraham answered in that same neutral tone he had been using since the beginning. Then he turned back to look at Diane again. "Ms. Dobler, you were at the Proud Stout earlier this evening. Entering into a venue underage and in possession of liquor? That's a Class C Demeanour."

"Was there a question in there." Billy drawled, littering ash onto the ground.

Mr. Ingraham's piercing eyes flickered up to regard Billy for a moment, before drifting over to look at the tape recorder.

"You witnessed a man interacting with two of our officials." Mr. Ingraham said.

Diane gave another soft yes. All she wanted to do was sink beneath the floor and then another six feet under the dirt. Billy had been right. She had been focused to the point of absurdity on something that had lead to nowhere.

Well, that wasn't true. It had lead to her breaking the law and being interrogated on her stalking tendencies by a US government official. She didn't stop to think about why Billy wasn't being interrogated at all.

"This stranger, did he give you a name?" He asked.

Diane shook her head. "No."

"A location he was staying at?"

She pressed her lips together for a moment. Then lied. "No."

There was something odd about his line of questioning now. Was it only to find out how much she knew, how much of a danger she was to any secret operations taking place? Or could it possibly be he didn't know himself?

Except of course he'd have to know, wouldn't he. And yet, a sharp edge had crept into his voice.

Taking two papers out of the envelope he presented each one individually to them before handing over an ink pen.

It was filled with legal jargon Diane would need at least a few days to properly understand. But she got the feeling this wasn't a document to take home and ponder over.

"This is a Non-Disclosure Agreement. It is part of the terms of your release."

Diane released a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding. Release. They were going to be allowed to leave. But of course, it was with an agreement that would work in the favour of the government. There didn't seem to be much of a choice for any leverage on their part.

If they signed this, they'd see the light at the end of the tunnel of this underground hellscape the Energy Department had turned into.

With a hasty scrawl from Billy and a meek signature from Diane they handed back the papers. Diane sank back into the seat in defeat.

"Everything you've said on that tape can and will be used against you if you break our Non-Disclosure Agreement. You will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law if you break this contract." Mr. Ingraham said. Leaning forwards he forcefully jabbed the 'end' button with his thumb. "Now, with that aside, we should get to the crux of the matter. I see you have found a certain creature associated with our laboratory."

Her eyes flickered over to the recorder, but it was still turned off. "What are they?" She asked.

"A much more complex question that you would assume, with an even more complex answer. A dangerous subject is responsible for this containment breach. It is an ongoing investigation, naturally. We expect to solve this discretely and quickly."

A containment breach? So those animals had originated from this lab. This lab which was much more than just responsible for electricity in

Hawkins. "My parents. They're involved in this?"

"You mean are they aware you are having a conversation with me in the laboratory? It has gotten quite late, and we would hate to disturb them." He replied.

"My parents won't be happy to know I'm locked down here." She said, trying another angle to get out of this place faster. She hated feeling so powerless, so at the mercy of the Department and the scientist in front of her.

Mr. Ingraham's smile was tempered by the faux-pity oozing in his eyes. "Ms. Dobler. Your parents have given us liability over you."

Her mind jumped to worst case scenarios. "They're fine though, right? I mean they're not in an accident, or in a ditch."

"This was two weeks post after your birth."

"What? Liability- what, like you just own me? Like my parents just - what, sold me?" Her mind had frozen, trying to understand what Mr. Ingraham had presented as naturally as he'd present any other fact.

"We do have certain interest in you, Ms. Dobler. But you have received a great amount of autonomy for well near two decades now. Owning is not the word I would use, custody is rather more fitting."

His words went beneath her like water under a bridge. All she could hear was that her parents had sold her and for a moment the world seemed to tilt sideways. It couldn't be true. They wouldn't. Mr. Ingraham was lying.

"I assume you're here for a reason." Mr. Ingraham said. "Tell me have you felt anything out of the ordinary recently? Perhaps things you felt odd or inexplicable?"

"My parents sold me?" She repeated.

"No. They didn't sell you." He said with a small shake of his head and a smile like he found her words filled with devastation at the revelation as endearing. "There was no monetary transaction. Think of this as being a ward of the state."

"I don't believe you." Her words wavered. Out the corner of her eye she could see Billy regarding her. But she didn't want to look at him, if she did, she might just begin truly believing it. All night he had been testing her loyalty towards her parents. But he couldn't be right.

*Back again.* They'd welcomed her back. Because if it was true, what Mr. Ingraham was saying, then of course she'd be more familiar to them than just being the daughter to her professional state-employed parents.

"Yeah listen," Billy sneered, "coming here wasn't our first choice. We'd rather have crashed into a bar."

"Perhaps we can stop circling around the same droll line of questioning if you had a moment to read something." Then he reached once more into the envelope and pulled out another paper. How many did he even have in there? No wonder they were stuck in that cell for forever.

Every paper prior had been neatly stacked right next to the envelope; the bottom of each was perfectly aligned.

With practiced routine, Mr. Ingraham slid the paper across from them. Both Diane and Billy leaned forwards in their seats to look at what was written on the incrementing document.

Most of the paper was redacted, long and short black stripes littering the document. But her eyes were drawn to where his long finger was tapping. They were perfectly manicured, but with his clear attention to personal upkeep that wasn't surprising.

At the bottom was written her parents names, and below that, their signature. She recognised it well, having seen those looping names on multiple papers at home.

*U.S. Government* was stamped on the side of the paper.

But above all that was her very own name wherein it was stated that her parents signed over care of her to the state.

The world she knew slipped away. She felt like an astronaut in space, lost from her ship in the cold, vast darkness. Now she was hurtling

into the unknown with nothing to grapple onto.

But she had to do something, so she pushed away the way the world was shattering around her and threw herself into logic and rationality which had become a safety net. Still, the holes in the net were widening and felt herself threatening to slip through into the abyss. "You say you have liability over me . . . what does that entail, then?"

"As we're both aware, it has been some time since we came across you last. We'd like to perform a routine health check-up."

Finally she glanced at Billy and they both seemed to have gotten to the same conclusion. Diane wasn't the only one. She felt her heart tighten with fear at she thought of scientific tests done on her like she was nothing more than a lab rat.

Everything had veered so far of course from normalcy all she was trying to do now was keep her head above water. Still, she felt like she was beginning to drown. At least she was sure Billy knew how to perform CPR from his surfing days.

He'd probably get a kick out of having to save her and she'd never hear the end of it. But at least that meant there were endless days in Hawkins where he'd be able to tell her, instead of stuck down here to rot.

"What sort of tests?" She asked, and felt a flash of pride at how cool her voice sounded.

If Billy was an inferno of pent up emotion, Diane was like frost tinting everyones vision to perceive her as cool and collected. She certainly didn't feel that way on the inside.

"A simple blood test." He said, and she wondered if there was a silent *for now* hanging at the end of his sentence. A shiver ran up her spine.

"What exactly will you be looking for?" She asked. "Am I sick?"

"You appear in good health. But our sample will give us further insight. It's nothing to be concerned about, simply a routine analysis. Albumin levels, potential chloride elevation, leukocyte count, among other standard tests."

"But why would you need to see if I have any issue with my liver? I've been fine since I can remember." She said, feeling mild annoyance at the way he was throwing out words with an assured air like she wouldn't understand what they meant.

Mr. Ingraham stared at her in appraisal. "You're a smart girl."

"I am my parents daughter." She said with force. Right now she couldn't face what they had done, and she still clung to a sliver of apprehension, that maybe there was a good reason for what they had done. And she wasn't going to let Mr. Ingraham see the way her reality was imploding.

"Yes, I'm well aware." He murmured, writing down something in one of the boxes.

The world shifted slightly again. Mr. Ingraham had a natural ability at muddying the waters of rationality. Every time she thought she was on even footing, he would give an answer she hadn't expected and somehow leveraged her into taking a moment to compose herself.

"We're testing for several things, including your alkaline phosphate levels. There are certain people of interest to us, and one thing we look for that is indicative of certain attributes you may still have is a low alkaline phosphate count; 22 to be precise."

"But that's way below normal levels." Diane breathed. Anything below 44 could begin being associated with anything from anaemia to hypothyroidism. At that level it would be noticeable. It didn't make any sense. All her yearly check-ups at Dr. Parry had given her the all clear with a pretzel to go. She rarely even got colds.

And what did that even say about her, that her count would be so low? If it even was, of course.

"It is indeed." He replied.

"What if I don't consent to giving you my blood?" She asked.

"I think you'll find it beneficial to work with us." Mr. Ingraham smiled.



The threat was implicit. They were at the mercy of the Department. They could either take a blood sample now, or later without her offering her arm free willingly.

Diane gave a stiff nod. In response Mr. Ingraham glanced over at the window, and a few moments later a doctor entered the room. He too was wearing a white lab coat and carried with him a small kit.

She rolled up the sleeves of the denim jacket and her sweater beneath; the materials bunched tightly around her upper arm. As she laid her exposed arm on the table, the cold metal seeped under her skin. The doctor dabbed her arm with rubbing alcohol, before wrapping a rubber band around near her elbow.

As the blood bag and needle were brought out she swallowed. Beneath the table their hands found each other, larger calloused hand threading his fingers through hers. Even with the unravelling revelations, a sense of comfort washed over her.

The needle hovered over her vein. Diane looked down at the table, and squeezed his hand momentarily as the needle pierced her skin. She looked away, staring at the floor as they took her blood.

As soon as the doctor had gotten what he came for he left as silently as he had entered.

"That's all for now. You're free to go." Mr. Ingraham said.

All of the papers were slipped back into the envelope. As he turned it around she caught numerals and letters on the front: *A0-283-48B*

While Mr. Ingraham walked over to the door he looked over his shoulder. "You'll be escorted out now."

It broke the spell that had them trapped to their seats, and slowly they got up. This time they walked even closer to each other, arms brushing against the other as they walked.

While Mr. Ingraham disappeared around a corner, they followed one of the soldiers through the hallways and up stairs. Finally, they came to the entrance.

The cool night air greeted them sharply as they stepped outside. At the bottom of the driveway the car was still there.

"Don't loiter." The guard said gruffly, before closing the door behind them. There was a click as the door was locked again.

She couldn't get away from the Department fast enough, and she strode faster than Billy towards the car. The feeling of deep unease was still roiling inside of her, and all she really wanted to do was run away from this place.

Reaching inside her pocket she dangled the key in front of Billy. Now she didn't care what happened to the car. Part of her hoped they'd just drive off a cliff and the entire thing would go up in flames. There was nothing for her to take hold onto anymore; she'd been thrown into free fall.

He plucked the keys from her hand.

As they slid into the damaged car they fought off the still deflating airbags. The car was sprinkled with broken glass.

They sat still for a moment. And then with a snarl Billy began hitting the steering wheel with unrestrained force. He let out a stream of swears. Twice his wild aim led him to honking the car. He was a raging force barely contained within the confined space. She learned several new swear words during his tirade as he spit venom. Electricity was crackling through his rage, energising the atmosphere.

But Diane was no longer startled. She was too far adrift in her own mind. Finally he stopped, gripping the wheel while lowering his head for a moment. He held onto the steering wheel so hard his knuckles whitened.

A moment later he straightened, and then grabbed the keys he'd thrown on the dashboard.

After a few attempts, the car started up. As he began backing up he looked over at her, but she couldn't face him and looked out the window instead.

"Where to?" He asked, face red and eyes burning bright with all-

consuming anger. But behind that, he couldn't mask his fear. But fear and rage were two sides of the same sharp sword. Fear could be turned into rage, and that was a weapon he wielded well.

"Anywhere." She replied.

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**A/N:** Was on vacation, internet was abysmal. Back again. All your reviews have been amazing and I loved every single one. I'll be back to much more frequent updates now.

**D-RavenxQueen:** You are absolutely right. I threw this story out there while figuring out the direction and characters so the first few chapters are a wobbling train wreck. I'm currently re-writing the first couple of chapters to fit the tone and direction of the story better. But it won't affect the rest of the story of course. Your constructivism criticism is completely warranted.

Yes Hawkins Energy Department is mentioned in the first season for sure, and I can't remember if the name is explicitly brought up in the second season, though I believe it is. Oh yeah, I'm loving writing his redemption because I don't think he's done anything too reprehensible to be unredeemable. He's just misguided.

Never watched Buffy, but I'm getting around to it because it seems great.

**Ladey Jezzabella:** Ahhh it's been so engrained in me the belief that Xena was from the 80's I didn't even bother fact checking it. But I've updated that reference now to fit within the timeline better. Sticklers for details are always appreciated! (Especially as details are my weakness).

**Katastrophex3:** Why thank you! The slow burn is killing me too, but it'll be worth it I swear. I also can't wait to veer farther away from the original ST plot, and the changes of inserting her character will become more prominent as the story goes on. I'm still on the first part of Part I of this story, so the groundwork is being laid. And yes, Part I . . . there'll be three parts to this story. ST2, ST3, and then beyond.

**Billy daddy:** firstly, lol that name. As for where his character is in ST3, he may or may not be targeted by the Mind Flayer. Maybe someone else is at the wrong place at the wrong time instead. Or

maybe he ends up in places he shouldn't be either. But I won't spoil anything ;)

**Guest:** That review just made me smile. I love writing dialogue so I'm glad you're liking it. The more I've been writing Diane and Billy the more I've been loving them together as well (is that a writers bias?). I'm a stucker for good plots, so I've been aiming on really ensuring there's a direction for this story with an eventual clear ending - but don't worry, there's still 2 1/2 more parts to this story before we get there. Anyway, here's me continuing this story.

**ReidsLittleGenius213, , rain-and-smiles, MotherAiya, SummerThrowback, SuzyQBeats, the perks of being divergent, I-am-sarah123, Guest, telipei1** thanks for your reviews!

## 14. Chapter Fourteen: Ma's Great Diner

He pulled into a small diner still open on a Tuesday in Hawkins right on the outskirts of town. Ma's Great Diner was illuminated in neon orange above the door. Only three others cars were in the parking lot.

Billy had been impatiently tapping the wheel the entire time and Diane figured he'd made a sharp turn into the diner just cut off the thoughts sprinting through his mind. The diner was a distraction, nothing more than a mental pitstop. But the air weighed heavy and she doubted either of them could escape the torrent of their minds for long.

As they were getting out of the car, an overweight man exited the diner. His brows jumped as he took in the state of their car, then smirked. "Rough night?" He winked.

Diane was tempted to grab him and throw him through the windshield just to clear out the rest of the glass.

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe, buddy." Billy said with a sardonic smile tinged with sharp frustration, before walking onwards.

They were greeted to the warmth of the restaurant and enveloped them in the scent of burgers and fries. Some of the latest pop played from the speakers quietly in the corner.

There was only one waitress working the front. A myriad of wrinkles were entrenched in her skin; more formed as she frowned at the newest customers she'd need to put down her Good Housekeeping magazine for entered the restaurant.

They slid into a red booth with the leather seats peeling on the fringes. Above them, the fan moved lazily. Diane stared at the menu with unseeing eyes. The deep-rooted feeling of unease was only lingering now. But every other emotion that was whirling around her like a cyclone was gaining in such intensity it may as well be at the near-cellular level she'd felt before.

The only sign Billy was affected by the interrogation was the way he sat tensely in the booth, hunched forwards. His eyes were too sharp and were flitting through the diner like he was expecting one of those animals to come bursting in; or maybe one of the Energy Department employees.

Her hand slid over the table, but stopped short of touching him. She had a feeling he'd only withdraw.

"Are you alright?" She asked, concern swimming in her eyes.

His eyes flickered in surprise before it was tampered down by indifference. His hand reached up to gently prod the scar partially hidden beneath his messy hair. "It's nothing."

"Inside." She prodded. Billy was sharp, and she had a feeling he already knew what she was inquiring about but tried to evade it anyway. Except Diane was stubborn. But he'd spent an entire night descending into chaos with her; that fact hadn't eluded him.

"Those Suits didn't do shit." He said after a moment. Then snorted at her like her question had been amusing.

"What?" She asked sharply.

"After everything . . . and you ask how I'm feeling." His voice verged on sounding incredulous.

Before she could reply, the waitress interrupted them, bringing with her the smell of stale cigarettes that clung to her pink uniform. "Welcome to Ma's Great Diner. What can I get you?" She droned, showing the lipstick stain on her upper tooth.

The skewed name tag read: Marla.

"Coke." She said, despite the fact she was jittery enough not to need any sugar.

"Anything else?" Marla asked, eyes devoid of joy. Diane shook her head in response. Her stomach was still a tangle of painful knots and food was the last thing on her mind.

"Order anything." She murmured to Billy.

He raised a brow, and then she pulled out a handful of crumbled bills.

"Beer." He said to the waiter, barely glancing at the older woman.

"I'll be right back." She grumbled, not bothering to check ID. It was probably above her pay grade to extend her care beyond anything other than taking orders and delivering food. Plus, they were two people ordering late at night on what she now remembered was still a school night. Hypothetically, they should both be in back in their cosy family homes preparing for the next morning.

The idea of going back to Hawkins High tomorrow seemed like a distant dream. Her entire life had been severed from all of it in two fell swooping signatures on a little piece of paper.

"I can pay for my own shit." Billy said.

"I'd take advantage of my parents money. They probably made a good buck selling me." She said, and reached into his jacket pocket. Her fingers trembled slightly as she fished out a cigarette and lit it.

"Don't do that." He said, deftly plucking the cigarette from her fingers. "When I start shit it looks cool. You just look like a mess."

"I am a fucking mess." She snapped, then lowered her voice. They might be the only customers, but they weren't alone. Perhaps in another moment he would've cracked a joke about her swearing, instead his eyes had sparked with anger that was new to her. He was staring her, but his kindling fury was aimed elsewhere.

Then she stared down at the table. She didn't just look like a mess, she probably looked pathetic.

"Fuck." He ran both hands through his hair. "Who the fuck do they think they are, thinking they can say whatever in the hell they want like they aren't running some lab under a layer of cow shit."

"Those people include my parents. The ones who sold me like an animal to that underground lab. The ones who disappear and only

call me to tell me when I'm acting like a piece of shit." Her voice rose. "I never got in trouble, I never- . . .

I did everything. I've worked my whole life to be perfect. Turns out that was impossible." She tipped her head back and looked up at the popcorn textured ceiling and laughed; it was a tinny sound.

She realised the most concerning thing this afternoon had been whether the entire school thought her and Billy had slept together. She wished everything was still that simple, because it would mean a return to normalcy. How had she gotten so far away from there? The lab had forced her into a paradigm shift with terminal velocity.

Caring about how losing her virginity to the newly residential bad boy only mattered because of how she'd be perceived by the employees at the lab when she applied there - like they cared who a teenager slept with. It had been a simple fear. Like every one of her fears was, because it was now about a future which no longer existed.

Everything she had ever done. For nothing.

Fading into the background had become an acquired skill for a position which hadn't been attainable in the first place. Every interaction mitigated by the constant desire to minimise her impact in the present.

"I missed out on Tommy's crazy New Years party three years ago. I could've said no to those extra classes to graduate early. God, I could've done anything."

Now she had been thrown into a situation that had turned her world upside down. There was no point in even entertaining going to the police department. What were they going to do, fight their own government? Her mouth was taped and silenced with bureaucracy on everything that had happened in that lab, and long before she could even remember.

She gave a strangled laugh. "Well, aren't you going to make fun of me? You were right. About everything."

"No." He answered softly.



Slowly she turned around to face him.

It was an emotion she hadn't seen him wear before. There was an understanding that shone in his eyes. His finger twitched like he wanted to reach out to her, but the distance was a vast chasm between them he seemed unable to cross yet.

"You're nothing more than a follower, Diane. You're just following what everyone expects of you. You act like a little angel because your parents want you to, and you always get the best grades because your teachers want you to, and you stay out of trouble because the Sheriff said it was bad to break the laws and live a little. So what the hell do *you* want?"

She gave him a measured look. Then narrowed her eyes. "Dunno, I think I've gotten into enough trouble to last a lifetime."

He blinked in surprise. Then his hand flew to his chest. It was the first time she had heard genuine laughter pulled out of him. It was higher pitched than she imagined, a contrast to his usual gravelly voice.

The colour of his eyes had changed with his flare of amusement. They had shifted from the dark ice of the Arctic to a bright blue the colour of a cloudless summer day in Hawkins. They showed promise of carefree days and careless nights that bled into each other.

She wondered how he looked when he was a boy running through the sand in California. Why was that brightness that glinted in his eye such a novelty? Something had obscured it from view, dark clouds hanging over his life that had dimmed this vivaciousness until it was hidden behind a heavy curtain of experience.

The way he laughed was intoxicating and lightened her mood a fraction.

"Why do you always act so callous when you're not?" She asked.

Instantly he became subdued with the raise of a brow, and she regretted asking immediately. "Don't know why you say that like it's some revelation."

"You just say a lot of some things, and you do a whole bunch of other things."

The limp cigarette danced up and down every time he spoke. "What're you implying', Dobler?"

"I can't figure you out." She confessed. She'd never had much problems analysing someone before, and that was at a superficial amount of time spent together. But with Billy the deeper she was drawn in to him, the more elusive he became.

"Maybe I like it that way. Or maybe you're so desperate to get your hand on another book to stick your nose in that you'll even try makin' up a story about me just to read into it."

Condensation ran down their glasses, pooling around the bases of their still untouched drinks.

"You told me I take control by keeping to myself, rejecting everyone before they can reject me." She said slowly, talking as her thoughts formulated. Diane looked over at him. "Why do you try to fight everyone around you? You're already strong, and we both know I'd be lying if I said you weren't handsome," he glanced at her, "and-"

"So I'm perfect and like some fun. What's the big deal."

Diane treaded carefully, "You don't seem to be having fun."

"What the hell do you know, your head's already buried in shitty books." He spoke through gritted teeth.

"Quit fighting me like I'm attacking you. I'm just . . . trying to be your friend." The word felt more like a mask to hide something that was deepening between them in a way that was so effortless it was unfamiliar. At least, Diane was treading in foreign territory.

Books told her everything she needed to know and everything to sate her curiosity, from the chemical make-up of carbonate, to the psychology behind the bystander affect. But there was no manual for this, hell with what had happened in the past few hours she wouldn't even know what chapter they were on.

He blew out a gust of air. "I don't do friends."

She licked her lips and then took a long sip of coke to avoid looking at him. His words stung her, though they didn't have a right to. She shouldn't care. But there was the keyword: shouldn't.

Diane still didn't know what Billy wanted with her then, not really. At times he seemed playfully interested in her, and he'd stuck around for an entire day when he didn't need to, despite what he said.

But then there was a comment like this. He didn't do friends. He didn't want to be friends with her. Yet she was drawn to him. Not because he was attractive, or that effortless way he could draw her in with that silver tongue of his.

But-

She was pulled away from her thoughts, distracting by the way he kept glancing down at his watch. "Got a curfew?" She asked, her voice light despite the way her heart hung heavy.

"Still have a date." He said.

Diane laughed in disbelief. "You can still think of any of that with what's happened?"

"Yeah," he answered smoothly, "I could use a little fun."

She stared at him, then ground out, "This didn't count as a thrilling experience for you? Because it sure has for me. In fact, I think I'll do it all again tomorrow."

"Cut the bullshit, Dee. Tomorrow you'll be back to your precious academic little life far away from me." He jeered. "And hey, the King of Hawkins High just got dumped, so looks like a place opened up. And Harrington's not picky."

Diane tensed and her eyes instantly burned with frustration. She'd just been signed over as nothing more than property to the government and this is what he wanted to talk about now. It was like he was purposely throwing away everything that's happened just to start a fight. But he did love running his mouth more than he loved

the sound of the Camaro's engine.

How was he *still* going on about Steve? It was absurd his focus on him. There was always a comparison he had to throw in between the two of them, even in times like these. Times, she was fairly sure, neither of them had ever been through before. But sometimes grounding your feet in familiar kept one from being swept up in all the pandemonium.

"That's why you hate Steve so much, isn't it? You can't bear to watch someone who's successful without having to fight their way to the top without having to be an ass. Steve is everything you aren't and oh, you hate that. You hate that you have to think that maybe there's an alternate road to the one you're on." She crossed her arms. "You know, the one where being nice doesn't actually kill you."

He was ready for a fight, and he leaned closer towards her.

Before he could reply the waitress was back again and his jaw snapped shut.

"Last round before the kitchen closes." Marla said. "Anything else I can get you kids?"

"No." Billy heaved himself up from the seat. "We were just leaving."

There were enough crumbled bills to cover both drinks and an excessive tip for the waitress. As she began flicking through the wad of cash her previously sullen face lit up. Then she looked at Billy and profusely thanked him.

For a moment he gave her a hard stare, and then said, "Thank her, not me."

The waitress turned to Diane in surprise, but before she could comment Diane spoke first through clenched jaw, "It's nothing. Have a nice evening."

As Billy strode to the car with crossed arms she desperately wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt in the way he'd picked a fight with her. The lab had something on him too, and it was alarming how easily it managed to curtail his haughty, arrogant attitude.

It was serious enough to quash the fight in him.

"What do they have on you?" She asked softly.

Billy whipped around in the parking lot to stare at her. Then he gave a sharp shake of his head, warning her to drop the subject.

"I can't tell you. It'll harm someone else." He said tersely.

"Max?"

"Diane." He growled.

"We're both under the same NDA, Billy. You can trust me."

His smile was sharp and humourless. "Trust is the reason I moved to this shit town."

Moving here to town, where Max had joined and immediately began hanging out with Dustin who'd told her all about the redhead and how cool she was.

Then her head whipped towards the dark street. Oh damn. Double damn. She was supposed to be babysitting Dustin tonight again this week. And she'd completely forgot. Diane was insanely late. Again.

He was a good kid, and she wasn't concerned he was going to do anything crazy. What she was worried about was if he was still on the dark streets, if Ms. Henderson wasn't home yet. She paled. What if he was attacked by one of those animals? What if any of the others - Will, Lucas, Mike, even Max - was attacked by them? They didn't stand a chance.

"Oh my god the kids could be out there. Can those things get into houses?" Her eyes were wide with worry, and the exhaustion creeping into her bones at once was ignored in favour of worry over the safety of Dustin and Co.

"What's the big deal, they'll figure it out." He drawled.

She stared at him, processing his apathy. "They're just kids."

"Yeah, not mine."

Diane thought of Max and the way she'd walk close to Lucas. Dustin was always welcoming, and she was sure that someone new like Max would've already been brought into the fold. "Your sister might be with them." She said sharply.

"Half-sister, and no, she's home. Or, she should be if she knows what's good for her. She knows the rules about staying out after dark." He answered. "And she sure as hell better be home, instead of out with Sinclair. But she's home." He lamented, almost more for himself.

Diane prickled at the way he singled out Lucas with a sneer. "He's just a boy, they're not going to do anything."

"Oh I don't care what she does. She's just not doing anything with him." He said. "And if she can't learn that, then he'll have to."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She hissed.

Billy gave a laugh devoid of humour. "You don't know my old man. Trust me, she'll learn at some point. I'm just tryin' teach her a little faster. There's certain people we don't invite home."

"Wow." She scrunched her nose, too stunned to give any other answer.

He leaned against the car in frustration, playing with the keys in his hands. "Drop the subject before I drop you in the middle of a cornfield on the way back. You have no idea what the hell you're talking about."

"What is wrong with you?" Diane snarled at him and the ferocity made him look up at her. "You'll seriously threaten a kid because you have a problem against what - being born?"

It was an explosion that was fiery and bright and all-encompassing. But it wasn't a fiery fury demanding to consume all around it and bring anyone in her vicinity down with it.

It burned bright as the sun, and he was drawn in instantly. Maybe because his was a supernova released within him, uncontrollable and

unmeasured and Diane's was borne of fierce protectiveness for those around her.

She was still fighting to accept her new reality, but the safety of the kids was a constant that would never change.

"Does it make you feel good, to attack someone who's weaker than you? Who you know can't fight back?" She hissed. With every word he said she felt like the coil of despair inside of her wind tighter.

"Max needs to grow the hell up before the real world comes knocking at her door and I can't protect her forever." He snarled. He couldn't tell her what his life was like inside his home, not without bringing her into his life. There was a feeling long buried beneath him clawing his way to the surface that he couldn't even place a name on yet. So instead, he was going to take her up on her offer for a fight. That was where he excelled, after all. Maybe if she was real smart, she'd stay away from him after tonight.

There was that feeling again, like he was trying to tell her something. It felt like she was stumbling around in the darkness and he was trying to throw a flashlight her way to shine a light on something being shrouded, except she was still grappling with something she didn't understand yet.

"Everything that happens to us, shapes us. But someone acting like a jerk to you isn't justification for you doing that to someone else." Diane snapped back at him.

"I can see you're all upset because you found out your parents are pieces of shit, but guess what, my life ain't changing. It was always this way and it's always going to stay that way. Those animals are gonna get shot, and the lab's still going to do what they've been doing for years. But my life, that isn't changing because of it." He snapped. "So why in the hell are you getting so pissed all of a sudden?"

"I just - God, I thought you were better." The words came out in one angry gust of air. They were more truthful than she'd realised, until they were out in the crisp night air, hanging between them.

"Well fuck this, I'm gonna go find Andie. She's a hell of a lot simpler

to be around." He finally said, reflecting on the night.

The coil sprang free and she whacked his shoulder with a smack; he didn't move an inch. "Yeah, she is. I'm sorry Billy. I'm really fucking sorry because if it wasn't for me, then I'd have been alone either of those times that thing attacked and then I'd be dead and out of your hair. And you wouldn't be held up on your great date, and you wouldn't have to worry about the police because we'd never have been together at all. And I'm sorry, that you ended up in the lab with me.

I'm sorry you had to see someone who's as valuable as cattle be owned by someone I don't even fucking know - and I'm sorry - okay? I'm sorry you had to see me get tested now, but hey, at least you won't see any more tests they run because we're going our separate ways now, right?" The words came out in sharp angry sentences as her hands gestures were in small, terse motions.

"Diane, listen-" He gripped her waving arm to placate her and dragged her closer.

"Get off of me, let go." She hissed, smacking his chest with her free arm. But her strength was weak and nothing compared to the beatings he got at home.

Her heart was thudding painfully hard against her ribcage. "Let me go before I say something I can't take back."

"Diane." His voice had grown louder as he stared down at her, eyes unreadable.

"Fuck, Billy, just let me go." She whispered, shoulders sagging in defeat.

His jaw tightened and he released her like he had been scalded. Then he held out the key, dangling it between his fingers.

She snatched it from his grasp.

"I'll get a ride." He muttered, glancing towards the diner.

"Fine." She said roughly, not bothering to look at him as she got into



the destroyed car and slammed the door shut. With shakey fingers she inserted the key.

Her world had turned upside down and she was stumbling through life now, but a protectiveness previously unknown to her unfurled within her, expanding with determination to defend those who needed it. She didn't know much about anything right now, but defending them as the one thing that was certain.

As she started up the car she glanced in the rearview mirror to see Billy striding back inside the diner. A strange emptiness was beginning to make itself known as she lost sight of the diner. Somehow they had been thrown together into a situation neither could've imagined, and just as suddenly they'd been ejected out of each others lives.

It was for the best, she tried reasoning. It had only been circumstance that had forced them together. They weren't meant to be in each others lives. So why did the thought of pretending like they didn't know each other in the hallways of Hawkins High feel leave a dull ache in her chest?

Diane didn't believe in fate. If she had, maybe she would've begun to see the invisible strands at work, intertwining through multiple instances to bind them together once again.

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**A/n:** This chapter really was supposed to be posted a few days ago, but the word count kept creeping upwards.

**Runaway Fantasy Princess:** You may just be on to something. I definitely had fun developing that part of the story because I didn't want to make it a conventional development (even if the person who didn't think they were special turns out to be special is a bit of a cliché).

**CaaRehme:** It is a little timeline skewed from the show series as there's hours in-between scenes. For instance El hears Mike saying it's a trap in that dark dimension when she's still in Chicago. By the time she found a bus and arrived at Hawkins that would already be about four-five hours in between scenes/episodes. So for Part I the timeline

does seem stretched, but I'm writing a little more liberally time-line wise as I'm trying to fill in for the extra hours in-between episodes/scenes.

ST3 onwards will feel like more natural since there's the entire summer leading up to the 4th of July and beyond. Also it helps that the entirety of those events are set in a twenty-four hour timespan.

**Guest:** The original intent was for the word to be used in lieu of calling someone an idiot, but it turns out different cultures carry stronger negative connotations, so to avoid any confusion it's been changed.

**Katastrophex3:** I would say she had a few outbursts this chapter, not helped by Billy. There'll be more depth to his character in the coming chapters, but he's telling Diane multiple truths throughout this chapter in his own way. Once she understands his home life it'll be easier for the both of them to communicate with each other.

**IsabellaAnne-Rogers, SuzyQBeats, toobssessed Guests and thanks for your comments!**

## 15. Chapter Fifteen: A Six Pack

Great. Dustin wasn't home. Neither was his mother, which was actually sort of great because that meant she still had time to find him before she was home. Even though it was dishonest. Maybe she'd tell Ms. Henderson to keep the money, it wasn't like she needed it anyway. Diane still babysat because it was something to do and she liked the ones she did babysit. Dustin especially, not that she'd tell the others.

As she began following a meat trail that had led her onto the old train tracks, she was debating whether to keep the money after all with the amount of weirdness already happening. She hated being out here, now that she knew what was running in between the trees. But her need to ensure Dustins safety was enough to propel her forwards, even if that meant following a trail of meat. With the danger lurking outside she'd probably berate him for this erratic science project he was clearly embarking on for his own safety.

Every now and then there'd be pieces of meat that had disappeared on the trail. She shivered, and wrapped the jacket tighter around her form. Her breath was coming out in white puffs lit up by the moons rays piercing through the overcast sky. The walk lead her up a hill and she struggled to find purchase against the wet leaves.

At the top the trees thinned, showing a car junkyard. As she passed a car she saw several figures up ahead and froze for a moment. But the way they moved was decidedly human. She hurried her step, relief as she overheard a familiar voice. It was Dustin, and with him had to be his friends. But who was the taller figure?

Hurrying her gate she manoeuvred around another car before doing a double-take. The tallest figure came to a sudden stop as well upon seeing Diane.

She squinted. "Steve?"

His eyes widened in shock. "Diane?"

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The streets in the centre of town were silent and his own company was his shadow cast wide across the street. When he was younger and stupider, he'd thought he could separate himself from the darkness, but it'd always be right there in step with him no matter how fast he ran.

He was trying to run now, like he always did. His old man wasn't always right, but he'd been right about that.

The way she'd given up, relaxing against a force she couldn't possible fight against had caused something within him to freeze. Every word he tried to utter got stuck in his throat until it was only her name that poured out as he tried to get her attention. But it was his words in the first place that had caused her to lash out.

It was okay, it didn't matter, he'd deserved it. He didn't even know why her eyes had instantly blazed with regret at what she'd done, it hadn't even hurt. But everything had become tangled, just like his straightforward path in life had been twisted and turned around because of her, until there was no words he could articulate. Instead he turned to a language more familiar to him: physical. He'd held her, silently demanding her to stop.

Instead he'd trapped her. The fight left her at once, the way the words had slipped out in a quiet plea was worse than if she'd just punched him. She'd lowered her eyes in the only and last attempt she had at protecting herself, and his gut had twisted violently in response; it was a move he was intimately familiar with.

As the car that carried with it all the stories they'd never be able to tell bound by the absurd and bureaucracy disappeared from the parking lot, a feeling worse than fury and frustration was dredged up from deep within. It was guilt, and it was dragging him straight into its dark pit to suffocate him.

The feeling wasn't unfamiliar. It was a constant undercurrent for him, powered by his relations with semi-feral half-sister, Max. But now it had sprung up to be front and centre. He was a live-wire with a dangerously electric storm of volatile emotions within, and his fist had become the conduit as it'd connected with the wall outside the diner.

Now he was nursing his hand as he walked through the strip mall off the main street, intent on getting to the little convenience store that still sold booze. It hadn't been hard to flirt his way into a ride with good old Marla. The only clue he needed to her being receptive to his advances was the magazine she was reading. As he'd leaned close the rest had followed with ease.

The door swung open and out stepped Tommy H, carrying a six pack. He instantly lit up upon seeing Billy stalking towards the door. "Hey if it isn't- shit man," he caught sight of the damage on Billy's face, "did you get 'em good?"

Billy eyed Tommy's six-pack. Of course he'd gotten the brand that tasted like piss-water. But he probably couldn't taste anything other than the bullshit that was constantly streaming out of his mouth anyway. "Going somewhere?"

"Just buying this for tomorrow after the Chem test. Last class of the day and all." Tommy replied.

"How about we grab a beer first?" Billy asked, feeling the itch of desperation. He hadn't even been able to pay attention to the beer back at the diner, but he was craving to soak his brain now, maybe it'd absorb some of the memories of this night.

"Oh, I should get back, my parents-" Tommy saw Billy raise an eyebrow, a bored expression colouring his features, "yeah, but they won't mind I'm coming back late."

"Great." Billy drawled.

"Someone should be the, you know, more sober one." Tommy said. It was painfully obvious he was hedging Billy into playing sober driver.

"We're splitting them." Billy said.

Tommy furrowed his brow.

"Scared of the Keg King drivin' you home?" Billy hedged with a sardonic raise of his brow.

Tommy's apprehension was tampered by his need to defend his

macho persona (or the one he thought he had). "Course not. What're we gonna hit anyways this late, a cow?"

"I only hit what I want to hit." Billy replied. "But we're driving in my car. Just gotta pick it up."

They slid into Tommy's hand-me-down car. The car smelled of spilled soda and the fake pine tree swaying on the rearview mirror.

With Tommy, the car ride seemed endless. He turned up the shitty, staticky radio. It still couldn't drown out Tommy's voice. But it didn't take long for the lapdog himself to turn down the radio with a yelp of surprise.

It wasn't much of a surprise. Diane was a terrible liar in any normal situation. Ironically, she was criminally smooth when it came to lying in dangerous situations. So in the car before they were attacked, her words were earnest. Of course Tommy would recognise her house. He might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he also didn't have the memory span of a goldfish.

Tommy was eyeing him with wonder as he pulled into the drive. "Seriously man, how do you do it?"

"Be me." Billy replied, sliding into the car.

For ten minutes Billy got some reprieve from Tommy as he drove alone in his car, following the vehicle in front of him. He'd missed his own car. They drove towards Tommy's house where he deposited it and plopped down into Billy's excitedly.

"Tina's party was crazy. I was so hungover in Lit I had to get a hall-pass just to go puke in the bathroom. Still better than listening to Mr. Calvestone though." Tommy said.

Tina's party had happened only twenty-four hours ago. He couldn't believe he'd had more action in the past night than he'd had for weeks in Hawkins, and it was because of Diane.

"But oh man, did you see Diane, she was wasted." Tommy said as if he'd telepathically picked up on exactly who Billy was thinking about, "Nance went right into Zombie Boy's brothers arms after Steve

threw punch on her after their fight about what happened in the bathroom. Should've been a girl fight between was so pissed she had to clean it the next day-" Tommy continued, but Billy had zoned out.

The words had shot out of him before he his brain could catch up with his mouth when he'd told her about Steve fucking Harrington. She hadn't rebutted him, maybe she'd even been entertaining the idea of getting together with Steve. The way Harrington had strode out of that bathroom with a smug grin on his face, which Billy figured was wholly undeserved. Diane was exasperating if not infuriating, but knowing Harrington's pasty, scrawny body was all over hers in the bathroom, that only infuriated him further. Harrington was pathetic, he couldn't even find his ass with his own two hands and he was supposed to find someone else's?

What he needed was that smirk wiped off his face. Of course Diane hadn't rejected the notion of getting together with *King Steve* Harrington.

He jerked the car sharply right, going down the bumpy road of a field partially sheltered by the trees. That animal could still be lurking around the dark foliage, but screw it. He parked the car and then the both of them slid out, shutting the doors behind them. Billy rested against the hood and Tommy knelt down, removing the plastic packaging that held the beers together.

As soon as Billy got one he snapped it open and chugged it.

Tommy gulped a few times before wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "Weren't you supposed to be out with Andie tonight instead of Diane? She's gonna be pissed."

Billy grabbed another beer. "How'd you know that." Billy was fairly sure he hadn't told anyone. Not that it mattered. She just wasn't much to brag about.

"She told us. Heard she's kind of a wild cat, leaves claw marks." Tommy said, eyes lighting up in excitement like Billy would tell him anything. "She's trying to get with you so hard."

"Dating?" He asked.

"Duh."

He lit another cigarette, and muttered, "Her standards are six feet under if what I had planned was considered a date."

Tommy howled with laughter. Billy didn't join in.

When he told Diane that Andie was simple, he'd meant it. Andie wasn't perplexing, and he was only drawn to her in one way. Like the other girls in Hawkins High, it was an endless source of amusement to him how they thought they were hot shit. They lived in Hawkins, Indiana. If he grew up here he'd try to get the hell out of dodge - like Diane was doing.

That's why Diane wasn't simple. Every time his thoughts seemed to stray back to her. She'd dug his way into his brain and the more he tried to ignore her, the more stubbornly she became rooted in his mind.

She'd been in the shadows for so long she melted into the background. He wouldn't have noticed her if it wasn't overhearing Carol's endless bitching about all those extra classes she'd been taking for years to graduate with their year even though she should be a Junior. But for girl reasons he didn't understand or care about, Carol hated the near-invisible Diane Dobler.

Getting her to write his paper would've been all too easy while he went to the reservoir and partied. Then she'd given him a blank paper in response, toying with him for days. It'd been the spark of her stubbornness that had first drawn him in to the fire that burned in her soul.

Now she was facing down men with guns, men in underground facilities, and driving a car she hated with cool calculation. As they'd rammed into the barricade her eyes had been unflinching as she stared straight ahead. He didn't even think she'd heard his warning over her speed.

She hadn't seemed to pick up his warning about him, either. The thought of what'd happen if anyone acted on those files the Energy Department's goons had unearthed had him tilting his head back and



finishing the second beer hastily.

"Andie's gonna be so pissed." Tommy repeated with a snicker.

He tossed the empty can it into the bushes. "And I don't care."

Andie was going to come crawling back anyway, because the town which she lived in conditioned her that way. Small, tame hairstyles. Bell bottoms were still a thing. The biggest gossip around town was the mall being built. Hawkins, where everything arrived ten years later.

The worst part about everything arriving late here? It wasn't even the best of the culture at the time, it was the discarded scraps that weren't cool enough to ever really take off, like those conservative corduroy pants. So of course, someone like Andie would come back to him, because he was new and leagues better than anyone else around here.

They talked more about the party and everything that'd gone down. In comparison to the parties Billy had attended back in California, these stories were tamer than a newborn kitten. But as Billy was half-way through sipping his third beer, Tommy inevitably ran right back to getting the details on what had been going on in his life.

"Man, yesterday night and this afternoon? Like missing-out-on-Andie-for-her kind of afternoon. Come on, is she really that good?" Tommy implored, kicking a small rock with his foot.

"Are you getting blue-balled by Carol right now or somethin'? Seem to be real invested in this." Billy said.

"Come on man, you totally did, didn't you?" Tommy asked. "Is she as much of a frigid bitch in the bedroom as she is outside of it? Or is she one of the secret crazies? After everything that went down at Tina's party - oh man, she totally is, isn't she?"

Diane was good at deception. She was meticulous with time but didn't wear a watch. She was scared of driving but drove with the levelheaded abilities of a seasoned race-car driver when she was truly scared. How she became alive beneath his touch, the ice around her

gone in an instant like it'd never existed in the first place. More insightful and sharper than she let on, yet marvellously blind in other areas.

The way she seemed to be uninvolved in everything around her, except she jumps at any opportunity to help others. She'd been willing to take a bullet for him though she was far from deserving of that fate; no one had ever done that for him before. But no one should for him, especially not someone like her. Except she had such an annoyingly unwavering compass, he was sure she could be in the North Pole and it'd still point North.

"Just . . . lay off her, all right?" He took another drag, looking at the tree line. The boring mundane trees that grouped together around the endless fields which glittered with frost in the early mornings on the way to school.

He missed California. He missed the scorching sand beneath his bare feet before the ocean dragged him forwards. But what he missed most was the freedom. He missed driving down the long winding road by the beach. The girls rolling skating in short shorts and sometimes nothing but bikinis, wind whipping their long hair around.

He missed feeling the weight of his surfboard beneath his arm. He missed the roaring silence of the ocean as he was dragged beneath the waves after a wipe-out, and for a few moments he understood what peace felt like. The weightlessness of it, cocooning him from the overwhelming tide of his own mind; there was only the present.

He missed the smell of fried food by the boardwalk as he dredged himself up from the beach, hungry to stretch out and relax after a long day of surfing. Occasionally a brave seagull would make a sharp dive for a fry in the tray before narrowly evading his hand batting out to hit it away; they'd learned to manoeuvre through years of greedy expertise.

The days stretched out endlessly, and the nights went by too fast. When families and the tourists went home as the dusk stretched out over the sea, painting it in glittering reds and yellows is when the partygoers crept out of their easygoing day-slumber to come out to play. Excited sparks leapt up from the bonfire like they were trying to

reach the twinkling stars.

Hoots and hollers crashed around like the waves thrown onto the shores of the beach. They were unshackled from whatever lives they led during the day. They were free.

At least for a while, with the beer warming his veins and the cigarette smoke curling around his lungs and some tipsy girl that clung onto his side it felt that way. If he didn't throw himself hard enough into the present, then the past threatened to drag him down.

Now he wished he was in the past instead of being present with Tommy Fucking H. He wasn't even good enough to just get the name Tommy, so he had to be distinguished from the rest of the fuck-ups at Hawkins High with the same name.

"Oh, man!" Tommy yelled, placing his palms on his scalp in shock. "You are totally fucking whipped. By Diane freakin' Dobler. That's what this is, isn't it? Is it true the geeks are always the freakiest?"

Slowly, Billy licked the back of his teeth. Then his eyes flashed over to look at Tommy. "Heard you wanted to get into her pants for a while, but don't worry, Tommy. There's plenty of other fish in the sea, right?"

Tommy's face contorted into a grimace and he was already spluttering to defend himself, "Man I don't care about that basket cas-

"I'll be sure to leave you some." Billy said, slipping off the hood and bumping into Tommy roughly as he walked by. A soft click resounded as he locked all the doors.

Tommy turned around and tried the door handle. He tried pulling it again several times, then looked at Billy. An unsure smile was growing on his face as he waited for Billy to let him in on some joke. But Billy stared right back, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel.

"I'm not coming?" Tommy asked in an uncertain tone.

"Why would you?" said Billy as he readjusted his hair in the mirror.

He could see the growing look of uncertainty on Tommy's face from the corner of his eye. If Tommy said *man* one more time, Billy was going to run him over. Twice.

Being used as a second-rate speed bump would make him more useful to society than he'd ever been in the entirety of his existence.

"We're friends, man."

Slowly he righted himself and turned around, blowing smoke lazily out between his lips curling into a sharp smile. "Cute."

Tommy's face grew a hot red at the dejection before he tried to regain his wounded ego and puffed his chest up. "Whatever man, no one care-"

"Don't care."

Tommy gathered himself for his last words, yelling "Yeah, well, fuck you too!"

In the rearview mirror he saw Tommy flipping the bird at him. Billy grinned as he revved up the engine. Tommy H was finally funny.

They were only a mile or two from his part of the neighbourhood, he'd probably be fine to walk back. It hadn't been his initial plan, but he didn't feel all too bad about it as he drove home. Tommy would most likely be fine walking back, Hawkins was a small town with large tracts of land. Plus, that animal had to rest at some point and it'd already been pretty damn active.

As he parked the Camaro outside he stared into the Hargrove house. The light in the living room was on. He sat in the car for a long drawn out moment before sighing and getting out, slamming the door behind him. No point in delaying coming inside. Either something was going to happen or it wasn't.

He opened the front door slowly and his shoulders lowered immediately. The living room was empty. The door closed gently behind him on the possibility his old man and Susan were asleep. As he peaked down the hallway he saw their door wide open without the lights off. They weren't back from their trip yet. Some of the

tension ran out of his body.

Billy sat down on the sofa and stared at the floor. He rubbed his temples. Jesus, what a night. Tomorrow was a concept he'd completely forgotten about. But time was going to move on, and his life would stay the same, just like he'd told Diane.

Tomorrow they'd bump into each other at school. He figure she'd avoid him tomorrow and forever onwards, pretending like the previous night had never happened. He wasn't going to say anything, because he wasn't going to chase her. He never chased. Yet he had a feeling he'd be waiting a long time. Diane wasn't someone who loitered around waiting for something to happen. If she'd come to a decision she'd stick with it.

The silence was lingered in here was too much. He stood up. It really was too much, Max's alternative music was always drifting out of her room when she was home, which she should be now.

As Billy opened her door, he saw it was empty, except her skateboard was still on the carpet. That little shit better be hiding somewhere. He'd pick up his pace as he strode through the house, peaking into each room. Billy opened the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink in desperation like she'd stuffed herself beneath there. That too, was empty of her presence.

Billy strode over to the front door and ripped it open. He took a step onto the porch. "Max!" He roared into the silence. She was somewhere out there, and so was that animal.

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**A/N: I know I'm a lazy writer who just transplanted two show lines from Billy and Steve's conversation into the story here so you can boo and throw tomatoes at me now. (Well, fish instead of bitches but that was deliberate).**

**Crzychigurl343:** They really are stubborn. Just imagine the possibilities when they unite together and turn their stubbornness on the same target. Diane will be getting a more instantaneous epiphany soon. I think Billy's is more of a culmination of factors that's leading him to viewing Diane differently which has been ongoing over the

past 24 hours.

**Abby:** Thanks! Exploring his psyche is always fun to do.

**I-am-sarah123:** Thank you! I'll take your comments as 5/5 likes instead

**MotherAiya:** He's in a pretty tough spot, both in coming to terms with what's happened himself but also in trying to protect Max from now the governments focus and Diane from what/who's played a big part in shaping him. He's also protecting himself I suppose, he has everything nicely compartmentalised right now and lines blurring means losing control. But he'll have some decisions to make once he can't protect them like he wants to anymore.

**MulishaMaiden:** Thanks! They really needed an emotional break to just let everything out since it's been bottling up the entire night. Billy isn't the best at communication at the best of times, but he's really restrained in what he can tell Diane at the moment . . . unless an event occurs which just knocks straight through his carefully hidden home life.

As for the lab they'll continue to play a part through for a while. They're just getting started.

**Guest:** A more filler-esque chapter is what happened. Billy ended up taking over much more of the chapter than I had planned.

## 16. Chapter Sixteen: The Babysitter Squad

As she got closer she saw she'd been wrong about the other figures. The fog slithering along the ground was messing with her perception. Or maybe she had a concussion from the car crash. But that was Steve, alright.

He waved his hand furiously for her to hurry up and come over.

She picked up her pace, partially for the feeling of deep unease that was returning. It was a feeling that was become unhappily familiar to her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" He shot out, his eyes flickering across the landscape, a spiked bat in his hand.

Wait, a spiked bat? Where the hell did he even get that? "What am I doing here,— what are you doing here?"

"Just stay close." He said.

"Diane get inside the bus!" Lucas called out. Since when did Steve Harrington hang out with kids?

Her head whipped around and then she looked up to see Lucas Sinclair on top of the faded public bus, with Max. She had a feeling Billy was not going to like that. But she wouldn't be telling him and she had a feeling Max wasn't either.

"Am I missing out on a creepy impromptu sleepover, or a seance of a bus driver or something?" Diane asked.

"Dee now is really not the time." Steve muttered.

Then Dustin peaked his head out of the door, "There's something happening here that really doesn't make sense and it's really not safe for you and you need to go home right now, Diane. We could all die."

Steve glanced back at her, mouth drawn in a serious line and eyes hardened with determination. She knew him long enough to know he didn't go out of his way to appease kids. If he was being serious now,

so should she.

"Yeah, I think the time for leaving is gone." Steve muttered.

She stood a little distance behind Steve, but in front of him she could see a familiar shape. Her heart turned to ice. Why was it that demon-dog was unescapable. Everywhere she went, it was there.

"Steve you need to get back right now." She whispered.

"Can't." He replied, his voice curt and low as his focus was on the animal in front of him, bat raised.

Luminescent white tendrils curled around their ankles, breaking apart every time they moved forwards.

"No you don't understand—"

"I got eyes! Three o'clock! Three o'clock" Lucas yelled, voice cracking with nerves.

There was another slinking around the bus. It was much closer to her than Steve who was now adjacent to her, his feet nearly touching a pile of meat. She froze. There was more than one. The lab hadn't released one, they'd released an entire pack.

The demon-dogs mouth was partially open, resembling a black hole in the rough shape of a star. The dread was threatened to overwhelm her. There was nowhere for her to hide and she had nothing to defend herself with. The demon-dog took another slow step forwards, observing her.

Then it opened its mouth wider, making a high pitch clicking noise in response to a softer yelp emitting from the darkness. They were communicating with each other.

Then the horror inside of her was all-consuming as she stared at the animal. It felt like she was right back at the lab. If before had been swishing her hand across the surface to look at the rippling waves of an inky lake that sucked in all light, now she'd slipped into the water, half her body submerged into the cold depths of horror and disorientation.



If there was an invisible current in the universe that went through all living things, it was sweeping through her and the demon-dog in front of her. It was almost like she could feel the creature across from her on some deeper level she didn't understand.

Suddenly a damn burst within, and Diane was swept up in its current as she was pulled into a near trance as she cocked her head to the side, staring the animal. No, not animal. It felt like . . . a disease that infested the living. Still a natural entity, but one whose purpose was corruption and destruction.

She took a step forwards and the demon-dog mirrored her. This close she could see the creature in detail. The gnarled dark skin seemed to strain like tree roots straining to break the surface of the soil it resided in, which glistened like that of an amphibian. A ray of fine teeth swirled around its mouth coated with saliva.

The feeling that it wasn't going to harm her was innate. If their previous relationship had been predator and prey it had shifted so smoothly neither seemed to realise until it had already happened. Now they were neither predator nor prey. It felt like they were the same species - no, that was too personal.

It was as if she were a part of its pack; Diane was no longer viewed as a threat by the animal. The demon-dog felt subdued as it continued to look at her. Like an invisible thread was pulling at her, she began reaching out to it.

Then a rock bounced off its head. With a hiss it looked upwards to see Max with still outstretched hand and Lucas's jaw dropping in shock. Dustin was yelling at Steve.

The link between them was severed and Diane inhaled sharply. The sound got the demon-dogs attention again and it whipped its head back to her. Then it lowered itself, ready to attack.

She dove to the side, rolling across the grass as the dog leapt past her. She scurried backwards and stumbled upwards. The demon-dog continued running, looping around to get Steve.

Steve dove over a car. The kids were screaming and her feet were

already taking her to the bus, kicking up grass as she sprinted towards the door. Steve bashed one of the demon-dogs away before tearing into the ground and catching up to her, hot on her heels.

They leapt into the bus at nearly the same time, colliding with each other. Dustin kicked the door shut and the bus rocked with the weight of the demon-dog leaping into the door. They untangled their limbs, Diane heaving herself forwards.

Steve blockaded the door with an extra scrap sheet of metal. The bus rocked again and the kids shrieked. Then a paw swiped through a crack in the door, bending the metal frames.

"Go!" Diane yelled, shoving Dustin who was closest first. All of them scrambled towards the back of the bus while Steve grabbed his bat.

She hadn't felt it before but there was a spectacular headache blooming inside her head, its beating petals pressing against her skull.

The bus was rocking as they launched themselves against it. A window shattered and they shrieked as they ducked. Diane got the worst of it as the shards hit the side of her face and she imagined this is what tv static felt like personified. Then there was silence.

A loud thud caused the bus to sway, and their heads whipped up to track the ceiling. Plaster rained down as the creature moved slowly forwards, a large thump of each paw as it went. Diane began moving backwards, eyes trained above her as she moved, then she yanked Max back and she stumbled into Lucas and Dustin.

Her mind had jumped faster than the rest of them: the ceiling door was still open. Max screamed at the same time the demon-dog came into view. Its mouth opened like petals into a guttural roar. Saliva glistened amongst its rows of teeth. The curdling smell of rotting meat and atrophy nearly caused her to wretch.

Diane wrapped her arms around the kids and push them back harshly as she put as much distance between the demon-dog and them as the bus allowed. They all went stumbling; she fell and hit the back of her head on something sharp and decidedly metal.

Black dots swarmed her vision and for a moment her body wasn't working. She thought a small sound of shock came from her, but she wasn't sure. Steve stood above her and the kids with a baseball bat, waving it in front of the open window. If that thing was coming in, then it was going to get wrecked by Steve's bat first.

Her hand went to the back of her head, and she doubled over in pain. Oh yeah, something was wrong. Adrenaline was enough to animate her again and she forced herself to stand up, arm going back to form a loose barricade between demon-dog and the kids. Babysitting really was for life - and death situations.

Diane was protecting the kids and Steve was protecting all of them.

Then the creature froze before its head darted up towards the skyline, hearing something they couldn't. There was a pause, and then a snarl as if enraged at something that was happening. It leapt off the bus.

They began looking out the window, as Steve moved to the front of the bus and opened up the door, hopping off.

A few seconds later he was already back. "They're gone, leaving somewhere."

What the hell was wrong with her? She'd almost reached out and touched the demon-dog. The same one that'd tried to eat her multiple times. But she swears it'd become docile towards her.

Until Max had thrown a rock right in its face. Max and Billy might not be genetically related, but *attack when in doubt* seemed to be a family motto.

"You're late. For the second time this week." Dustin said.

Diane groaned and stuck her head between her legs as she squeezed her eyes harshly to try and dampen the pain radiating from the back of her skull. "Yeah, I know. I'm the worst."

"Steve's a better babysitter than you are, and he's *Steve*."

"Yeah— wait what's that supposed to mean?" Steve asked.

"It means you're more busy taming your hair than looking after kids." Diane said.

"And yet I still showed up on time."

"It's not showing up on time if you weren't even invited."

"I was actually invited."

"Is Ms. Henderson double booking babysitters? I always knew she didn't trust me after the missing Baby Ruth incident." Diane replied, beginning to raise her head with a wince.

"Dustin invited me. Good thing he did or these nerds would've been eaten by demodogs." Steve replied.

She looked at Dustin. "Tell your mom I'll be paying her instead tonight."

Dustin and Lucas exchanged a glance before their lips pulled into a frown.

"What?" Diane asked.

Lucas shook his head. "Nothing, it's just we have a friend whose nose also sort of bleeds."

"But differently." Dustin elaborated, not that that helped her understand anything better.

Steve shook his head.

Diane put a finger beneath her nose, and when she pulled back it was stained red. Oh, she was bleeding. But it looked like it'd stopped after only a few drops. Weird.

"She's acting really calm." Max finally pointed out. "Isn't that a sign of shock or something?"

"I've seen them before a couple of times." Diane admitted. "But I'm pretty sure I've been shocked since this afternoon."

Dustin looked at all of them, and then seemed to have a silent conversation with Lucas. Dustin's eyes widened and brows flashed upwards as he implored Lucas to silently reply to a proposition, but Lucas looked at Diane and then back to Dustin, shaking his head. Dustin speared him another look and then Lucas tossed his hands in the air, "Fine! Everyone seems to know anyway."

"How much do you know?" Dustin asked.

"Wait before we continue how do we know they aren't just making some elaborate plan to get us when our guard's down?" Max asked. "They seemed really smart."

"They're gone. Trust me." Diane said. She could feel it. Before the sense was only an all-consuming dread, but the more interaction she had with the demon-dogs the easier it was to hone in on it. The feeling was sharp as a whetted knife when the demon-dogs were close. Now it had faded like the fall of the tide.

"But how do you know?" Max insisted.

"I just do." Diane said with a sigh of exhaustion. "I thought there was only one. Hawkins National Laboratory sure didn't say anything about an entire pack." She said.

"Wait, you were inside? Did you see Will? Why were you there?" Dustin threw questions at her at a rapid fire speed.

Diane opened and then promptly shut her mouth. She was bound under a threatening NDA. "I can't tell you why I was there— and what do you mean did I see Will?! Why would he be in there?"

"We don't know." Lucas said.

"Diane are you okay?" Dustin asked before she could get her answer. "You look sort of cra—"

"Stressed." Steve said loudly, trying to drown out Dustin. "And Jesus, Dee. Is that a black eye?"

"I don't think it counts if the bruise is beneath the eye." She said half-heartedly.

Steve's brows knitted together in concern as he strode over to her. "What happened?"

"I don't really know where to begin, or where to even start." She answered.

"Maybe at the fact you were in the lab?" Steve suggested.

"You don't understand. I really can't." She stressed the words, hoping someone might pick up on the NDA so she didn't have to say it. But by the furrowing brows, none of them were. "Okay, how about we talk about what you know about those demodogs?"

"Well, they're from the Upside-Down." Lucas said.

"The upside-what?"

"No, the Upside-*Down*." Dustin corrected.

"Yeah, no, I got that. Sort of?"

"It's where the Shadow Monster is from. We thought if we got Dart, then we could understand its link to Will."

"Will is involved in all this?!"

"That's what we need to confirm." Dustin answered.

"And who's Dart?" Diane asked.

"Yeah, he's been raising one of those demodogs as his pet." Steve said with a cheerfully mocking tone. "And then it ate his real pet."

"Only for like a few days." Dustin defended.

"Is that why I wasn't allowed in the house earlier?" Diane asked.

"Maybe."

"Oh my god!" She threw her hands up in the air, then winced. This headache was killing her.

"It ate Mews?!" Lucas exclaimed. "You seriously kept him?" Lucas

scowled at Dustin.

"Wait, is that Billy's jacket?" Max asked with narrowed eyes.

Diane glanced down. Oh, right. Well. This was going to be awkward to explain. "It's been a long night."

"Evidently." Max muttered, crossing arms. Lucas snickered, but Dustin's eyes were widening in horror.

"Billy?" Dustin squeaked.

"I think we have a different idea of what happened."

Max raised a brow with an unspoken *try me*.

"Hold on, hold on. You were with Billy? Like Billy Hargrove?" Steve asked with hands on his hips, brows raised in disbelief.

"Is that really the most important thing right now." Diane snapped at him.

Diane knew she was in for a chaotic conversation when it involved Dustin and his friends. Staying on track when it came to them was a feat she'd yet to accomplish.

Lucas went back to attacking Dustin, who was fighting back over keeping a demodog as a pet. Max seemed to be at the epicentre of their fight though. Oh, young love in a time of demodogs and villainous laboratories.

Steve and Diane walked a little ways away to have their own hushed conversation. The kids weren't being quiet and every one of their words were overheard. Apparently they were also discussing a plan to go over to Will's house.

"I can't believe you let them do this." Diane said. The situation had become deadly, and it was late at night, none of them should be trying to set up traps in a junkyard. She knew she was late to babysitting, but she would never purposely help them out on dangerous escapades.

Steve narrowed his eyes as he put his hands on his hips. "So you came late to babysitting."

"Don't judge me, Steve Harrington." She shot back. "If anyone should be judged, it should be you. And I'm really exhausted right now. I've had an unexplainably exciting night that I wish I could forget."

"Is that what you'd call what you were doing with that grade A douche from California?"

"I don't care about him."

"Says the girl wearing his jacket."

"It's pretty ironic you seem to care so much about what I've been up to and with who. You left me at the party. You talk to me in rooms where it's only the two of us there. The only reason you talked with me yesterday night was because you wanted to get rid of your guilt. But you don't want to really be friends because you still want to be popular, and us hanging out will ruin that." She told him. "At least one of us can be upfront about our 'friendship'."

Steve opened his mouth and shut it. He didn't know how he'd forgotten about Diane's penchant for honesty, but it hit him as sharply as a whip like it did every time. "I'll find a megaphone and talk to you in the hallway with it tomorrow. Would that be better?"

"Sure."

"A thank-you Steve, would suffice." Steve replied, still waiting for acknowledgement on his own babysitting skills, not that Diane agreed with them completely.

With a heavy sigh she acknowledged the fact that they were still all alive, "Thanks." They all needed to go. If the Lab found out how many people had come across their escaped animals, she was sure everyone here would be tracked down and brought underground too. "We need to get the kids back home. We don't know if those dogs are coming back, and I don't think that bus will hold for round two."

"Yeah alright, let's get out of here." Steve said, swinging the bat loosing by his side.



"Max, you're supposed to be at home right now. Billy's worried." Diane said.

"My brother's not worried about me." Max replied quickly.

"He really is, and he's at home probably wondering where you are."

Max blanched as Diane's words finally hit her. "Oh crap I'm supposed to be home. He's going to kill me."

"No he won't, I'm coming with you." Diane said.

"You haven't seen him when he's angry." Max replied quietly.

"I have, trust me. I can handle it."

"Well we're not going home. We have places to be. This is serious." Dustin said resolutely.

"I'm serious, too. We're *all* going home." Diane said resolutely. "There has been enough curiosity tonight to kill a bag of cats. Including an actual cat."

*Come.* Lucas mouthed at Max.

She gave a sharp nod in response.

Dustin's eyes narrowed. "Okay, listen. We'll all walk back. You're right."

"Thank you." Diane said, voice tinged with exasperation.

As they headed back down the hill Diane was hoping this was going to be absolutely the last time she'd have to face a pack of demodogs, or anything else this town apparently now had to offer.

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**A/N: For Non-Americans, Baby Ruth is a candy bar. No actual babies are missing.**

**This story is currently closely aligning with the original plot but after Part I it really begins diverging.**

**Chodofaggins:** wow that's the best compliment I've ever received on this story so far (but don't tell anyone else).

## 17. Chapter Seventeen: Retrieval

They walked along the old railroad. The kids were walking in front while Diane and Steve took the rear, herding them forwards. To their credit they were all following the path.

"How long has this been going on?" Diane asked.

"Started last year. Then we defeated the Demogorgan — which is a really weird name, but the little shitheads are somehow in charge of the naming; it's easier just to go along with it — it was supposed to be over." He said. Wait, was a demogorgan the same as a demodog?

Diane couldn't believe Steve had been so ready to take on a demodog just to protect the kids. He'd stood in front of all of them, baiting the animal. There hadn't been an ounce of hesitation in his actions. They still weren't going to be friends, but he had her respect, for whatever that counted for.

But he'd dealt with one of these before. She never knew. Then again, no one did.

"We?"

"The kids, Nance, Jonathon, Will's mom, even Chief Hopper."

The information was so shocking she stood on the tracks for a moment, before her feet took her forwards again, one foot in front of the other while the gears in her mind began whirring. "Is Barb—"

"One of them took her." Steve bit out, thrusting his hands into his jacket pocket.

The truth of Barbara Holland sucked the warmth out of her, leaving in its stead a cold, somber reality. Barb wasn't missing. She was dead, and her parents were still trying to look for her. "Was it the Shadow Monster?" She asked, still unsure what that meant.

"No. A demogorgan took her into the Upside-Down, where this Shadow Monster thing is." He said. Chief Hopper wasn't doing anything to find Barb because there was nothing he could do, not

without roping in the Hollands to what was really happening here. Her fate was more horrifying than they could fathom.

She nodded slowly. ". . . where is the Upside-Down, exactly?"

"Sort of everywhere. It just appears."

"Okay." She answered, the word long and drawn out. It was the most unconvincingly pitiful sound that had ever left her lips.

"Just go with it, it's easier that way." Steve said.

They walked wordlessly for a minute, looking at the kids ahead. Max's pace was off, like she wanted to run off but her pride kept her from bolting.

If everything weird that had happened in Hawkins the past year could be attributed to the Upside-Down, then everything became much simpler and suddenly a whole lot messier.

In sheer desperation to at least pretend there was a return to normalcy in her near future, she thought of the information she'd learned tonight. "Sorry to hear about you and Nancy."

His voice was smooth as he tried to hide the heart-break. "Seriously it's only been a few hours, how does everyone already know?"

"It's Hawkins High. Wildfire spreads slower than gossip does. Except for the best kept secret in town: The Upside-Down." She replied.

"People like stupid shit, not real shit." He said, then sighed. "At least Nance is probably with him safe inside."

They fell into silence after that.

Diane picked up her pace, catching up to Max whose hands were stuffed into her green pockets. As soon as they matched their step they easily outpaced the boys, leaving them much farther behind. Max was silently eager to get into the car and away from this place.

Max would much rather have had this be some weird elaborate boys prank than what it really turned out to be. This was crazy; this town

was crazy; this state was crazy.

Both Diane and Max were so lost in their own thoughts they weren't realising the way their pace sped up even farther. For her smaller size, Max took surprisingly large strides.

Something seemed to drag Max out of her mind as she turned her head to look at Diane, then she scrunched her nose. "Billy's gonna be pissed you stole his jacket. He doesn't like girls wearing his things." She said, matter-of-factly.

A crease appeared between her brows. "He gave it to me. I'm giving it back of course. I just forgot I was wearing it, honestly."

She was met with silence as Max was pulled deep into thoughts again. She glanced at Diane, but said nothing. The trees thinned until they were walking down the hill and onto the familiar Henderson driveway, right where the car was parked. Ms. Henderson still wasn't home. Her ladies evening must be particularly exciting tonight.

"Wait, where'd they go?" Max asked.

Diane turned around to see the group had disappeared. "I have no idea. But there weren't any screams so they went voluntarily."

Max didn't seem all too bothered that she was separated from her friends, but Diane's mind was too crowded to take that information in and analyse it.

Wherever they had veered too, Steve Harrington better be taking care of them. Diane might not have been there to babysit on time, but Steve didn't need to indulge Dustin in her absence. For the love of all things holy, she hoped they weren't going anywhere near the laboratory.

After tonight she still knew there was a chance Dustin and his friends could end up at the Energy Department together with those men who looked human, but whose humanity had long been removed. But if they were quiet about it, they could avoid being on their radar.

Right by the garage was Diane's car. Max whipped her head towards the late babysitter, silently demanding an answer to the destroyed

car.

"Uhm, did this happen with Billy?" Max eyed her suspiciously. Clearly Max had placed her in into her brothers hook-ups category and had decided she wasn't trustworthy. Diane couldn't blame her.

"Your brother's distracting, but he's not that distracting." She said. "It was a demon-dog— sorry, *demodog* that hit the car."

Max was hesitant to get into the car. "Does this even still work?"

"Let's find out." Diane sighed, jerking the door open. It groaned, the metal hinges were clinging on for dear life and she'd be impressed if they even lasted the entire ride to the Hargroves.

With the utmost distrust she slid into the seat, having no faith it would make it all the way back home.

"You'll need to give me directions. Do you know the way from here?" Diane asked.

Strapping herself tightly in, Max nodded.

She glanced one last time in the rearview mirror before starting up the car, which spluttered to life and she winced. Yeah, it was in desperate need of repairs. Steve still hadn't appeared and reluctantly she started up the car.

No way was she taking Max through a wild goose chase in the dark woods knowing what was out there. At least she could round one kid up for now. One was still better than none. But all of them was the goal.

Max was staring out the window, paler than usual. Her hands were unconsciously gripping the seatbelt tightly, knuckling whitening gradually. The radio was off, but Max didn't seem to mind the silence unlike her older brother who seemed unable to sit through it.

"Max, you were super brave tonight." Diane asked, glancing at her. "You were cooler than most people would be. If you think something like that's going to happen again . . . look, I know you don't know me, and I'm also not your babysitter or anything, but you can call me,

okay?"

"Why? Because I can't handle it on my own?" She snapped, and she saw the mirror image of Billy as she rose to the challenge, indignant it was even being presented in the first place.

"What? No, because it's dangerous and you could get hurt." Diane answered.

Max shrugged, but seemed stubbornly set on proving exactly the things she was told she *couldn't* do. Or rather, the things she thought people were insinuating she wasn't capable of.

"You shouldn't trust my brother you know." Max's eyes were trailing the fractures in the glass.

Diane winced and gripped the back of her head for a moment. Then she forced herself to try and ignore it, focusing on the dark road ahead as she listened for the odd direction from Max. "In what way?"

"He doesn't really do people." Max replied.

She didn't either, really. It was an unexpected place to find common ground with Billy Hargrove on. She supposed if they were both achieving their goal of hiding behind closed doors, then the strategy on how they achieved those means weren't all too relevant.

"He told me he doesn't do friends." Diane said.

"Yeah, he doesn't do family either." Max muttered. Before Diane could respond Max pointed towards a house, "stop here."

Diane didn't slow down in time, and missed it. With a sigh she backed up. Dulwiche Hill. She hadn't expected him to live here. The house was average looking from the outside, albeit smaller than most houses in Hawkins. But this wasn't the nicest part of the neighbourhood. Owning a Camaro, she would've thought his family was a little more affluent.

She winced again as the pain flared up in protest, refusing to be ignored.

Max hopped out, and after considering for a moment, closed the door extra gently. Max was halfway up the pathway when she stopped and looked behind her. "Aren't you coming?"

"Just making sure you're inside safe. Sorry if its overbearing, I get it you're all in eighth grade and can handle yourselves. But tonight I don't feel that bad about it."

Max's brow furrowed. "But you're bleeding, and you really don't look good."

"It's nothing."

Max gave her a hard look; she was completely and utterly not convinced. "Just quickly, you can't drive off like that. I'm sure even Hawkins has rules about how much of a drunk driver you can act like on the road."

She didn't think she'd ever pair the words harsh and worry together, but Max's words were ones of harsh worry. They gave off a thin veneer of apathy, but she could feel the undercurrent of concern in her words.

Diane's eyes lingered on the door. It should be fine, right? Billy still had to be out with Andie. With a small sigh, Diane hauled herself out of the drivers seat. Then she gripped the door as her entire body spasmed in pain.

With the adrenaline and shock wearing off, she was being very sharply reminded of the eventful time her body had gone through tonight.

Max waited for her before she walked the rest of the way. Then she peaked in through the window, then nodded to herself before she strode over to the door and knocked on it several harsh times. Like Billy'd leapt from his position in the living room, the door swung a split second later.

Billy's eyed narrowed as he stepped forwards into the doorway, blocking entry. "And just where in the fuck have you been?" He snarled, but a breathe he'd been holding for far too long was released



forcefully with relief.

Then he took in her dishevelled state and wide eyes.

"What happened?" He asked sharply, before his eyes snapped up take in Diane's state. His brows shot up into his hairline. Her hand curled further into a fist as she hid the blood on her fingers.

"None of your business." Max said.

"You're on my doorstep—"

"*Our.*" Max said.

He ignored her, "— and you're bringing someone onto my porch. So yeah, it's my damn business."

His face was so cold and blank she had no idea what he was thinking as he turned to look at Diane, his words came out in a low voice. "This isn't a hotel, you need to leave."

She blanched at his hostility. They hadn't left the diner on the best of terms, and she was sure he wouldn't throw her a second glance when they saw each other in the hallways or bumped into each other in class. But it hadn't been that bad. Max was looking between the two of them.

Couldn't he at least see Max was besides herself and needed help? "I know, I will. I just need something to stop the bleeding."

Billy glanced behind the both of them like he was expecting someone.

For a moment his expression morphed into concern before the walls of contempt were erected again. "That sounds like a you problem. A you problem you can sort in your own house."

She stared at him. He was never known for his outwards show of empathy by any means. But he'd been showing glimpses into a rare gentler side of him throughout the night. Now he was being hostile like a cornered animal.

This angry was uncharacteristic, even for him. All of his volatility

was spontaneous and combustible, this felt like a deeper, more entrenched toxic undercurrent that had festered for years.

"I never should have hit you. A lot's happened tonight but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I'm sorry. I'm— I'll leave now." She said quietly, and she hoped he saw the sincerity burning in her eyes because she meant every word.

Something flickered in his expression, a conflict taking place within threatening to erode his stone cold expression.

"Just for five minutes, Billy. She's hurt and I don't know how to clean her up, or whatever." Max pleaded. "Neil's not home yet."

His eyes flashed with something dark; before she could figure it out it was gone.

Diane didn't know if she had the courage to get back to her big incredibly quiet and isolated house now, but at this point she was surely close to antagonising him with her presence after what she'd done.

"I - I'll explain all of it later if you want." Her head felt like a jackhammer was drilling into her skull. "Promise."

He put his hands on his hips and looked up at the ceiling, letting out a huge gust of air. "Fuck, alright, come on. But we need to make this fast."

Max wrestled around him and he scowls at her but doesn't put up a fight, doesn't even touch her as she goes hunting for tissue paper and a bandaid or two.

It's only the two of them now, staring at each other. Billy was here. His breathe held the faint tang of beer and as usual the smell of constant burning cigarettes clung to him, fighting to dominate against his fading cologne. She never thought she'd be as glad as she was to have those familiar scents.

Blue eyes were staring into hers, trying to discern her current emotional state. With the acceptance that she was going to step into the Hargrove threshold, the ice had melted to reveal the concern that

swam deep for her.

Then she threw herself at him, needing something immovably strong to anchor herself to for a moment. Her arms were around his neck.

He stiffened at the sudden constant. Then his arms wrapped around her, one hand sliding across her shoulder and threading through her now wild hair. "Hey, easy." He murmured.

For the first time in a long time, she felt safe as strong arms locked around her. Here, she could turn her back from the horrors of the outside world.

It didn't last long as a whimper escaped her when his hand rose too far and touched the swelling on the back of her neck.

He pulled back and looked at her, hand on each of her smaller shoulders. "Come on."

They stepped inside and Max closed the door behind them, arm carrying some supplies.

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### *Hawkins Energy Department*

Tonight had been more exciting than Edgar had experienced in a long time. Not that he got to be a part of it, of course. Instead he was stuck in the surveillance room, feet propped up on a table and staring at the monitors with glazed eyes.

The only other person in the room with him on the farthest side she could be, was Sheila Adkins. They weren't on good terms after she'd reported him for abusive language. It wasn't his fault Adkins couldn't take a joke. Clearly she couldn't let her hair down, figuratively and literally. Now they were stuck working overtime because some little mutant weirdo was causing some issues. It was beyond him how scientists spent so much time trying to understand things when they could just shoot at them instead.

Only the static of the monitors kept the silence at bay. No radio worked this damned far below ground. Then he leaned forwards. More drama on that little zombie freak. Now he was thrashing in his

gurney. He'd seen people with seizures act less dramatic. Rolling his eyes he leaned back in the chair.

He'd been working more hours than he was getting paid at this point with no sign of being able to leave. The pay was shit too. All he wanted was to get home, grab a TV dinner and a beer, and sit down and watch The Dukes of Hazard.

But he wasn't going to be complaining tonight. Oh woah no, not after what had happened to those two employees who'd gone into to town and fucked up. He didn't know what it was they were caught for, everyone was tight lipped, and that meant it was bad enough. They were dragged somewhere down the hall and then they disappeared. Now, if they needed someone to help in the interrogation room, he wouldn't mind leaving this room to do just that.

Light flooded the room as the door was opened without hesitation. Matthew, his super officer glared at him, holding a clipboard with a couple of papers attached. Fucking finally. He stood up sharply.

The first page held a photo of a girl on it. "Bring her in. Immediately."

Sheila freakin' Adkins could take over surveillance here. He was going out to do a real job. Now she could bitch about work place violations into an empty room.

"Sir what about the Beyers boy?" He asked.

"What about him?"

"Don't we need all hands on deck?" Edgar couldn't help the sardonic tone laced with his words. This 'special' kid was turning this place into a circus for nothing.

"Follow your orders."

He scrutinised the photo. "What's this chicks deal?"

"She's an experiment. Handle her with caution. Your unit is already outside." He said, eyes looking pointedly at the file, fully expecting him to read it before he got into the van. Edgar gave Matthew a tight lipped smile.

Overworked and underpaid. But this, this might just make up for it. Another experimental freak to bring back into the fold. He didn't suppress his gleefully smile. "Yes sir, right away sir."

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**A/N:** I think the show established this season that the road was called Cherry Road, but I came up with this name a few months prior and I'm sticking with it. With that exception, I am trying to stick to all other show facts.

**MulishaMaiden:** And Diane is already separated from Steve. Their story together is not done, but they're both finding out who they are as people and right now they're not quite in the same place. Her powers grow and expand throughout this story and it'll be fun to see the interactions she has with people and how she ends up using it.

**crzychigurl343:** The idea made me giggle. Billy is on the road to jealousy without realising it, and he'll definitely have a comment about her spending time fending off demon-dogs/demodogs with Steve. The three of them arriving in the car together would've pulled some great interactions between them, but it just didn't work out that way. But their paths may cross in the future.

**I-am-sarah123:** One can always dream

**SuzyQBeats:** Your comments keep me motivated

**Wasabimomi:** Here is more!

**Izzy:** Your comment was so kind and thank you. I can't wait until all of the characters begin having more interaction with each other. Right now it's still part one which is just centred on the hectic 24 hours that happened in ST2 and everyone's quite split up from each other. Diane's ripples in the stories original plot are beginning to make waves and will have more obvious consequences on the story in a few chapters time.

## 18. Chapter Eighteen: Bubblegum and Glass

He closed the door behind her. The house was small and had a certain air of chaos still attached to it. The windows with plastic blinds were pulled partially down and faded with years of use, while the downtrodden pastel yellow carpet did little to hide the scuff marks on the wooden floor.

She took another step forwards, eyes flickering through the living room. The only family photo in the living room seemed to be of Max and a woman with the same fiery red hair and gentle blue eyes who could only be her mother placed on top of the fireplace mantel.

Billy had evaded speaking about his parents, but now her curiosity was piqued. It certainly didn't look like they moved to Hawkins for a salary raise. A lamp was placed on-top of an upside-down moving box acting as a makeshift stand, like they were too busy to properly settle down. Or perhaps they were still living with one foot out of the town, ready to move at a moments notice.

Billy's hand flashed out and gripped Max's face lightly. He jerked it from side to side, eyes flitting over her face. "Anywhere you're injured?"

"No." She said.

"Good." He answered, then gripped her arm and pulled her close as his voice lowered in warning, "Don't do shit like that again; and I'm not fucking kidding."

Max scowled in response, perturbed by his reprimanding tone as she jerked out of his grip. "I got it."

Then he glanced over at Diane. Beneath the ceiling light his eyes trailed the small shards of glass glittering on her cheek to temple. She swallowed harshly as another wave of pain wracked her body and Max took immediate notice.

"You should probably have sugar, uh—" Max looked around, before moving around trying to locate something specific.

Billy watched the red flurry that was Max dart around the living room. "Why would she need sugar?"

"When someone gets hurt they need quick energy or they'll faint." Max grumbled at her older half-brother before she strode over and began digging into the couch pillows of the brown plaid couch.

While Max was rummaging, Diane shrugged off the heavy jacket and draped it over the side of the couch. It didn't even have one tear in it, meanwhile her clothes were full of rips and holes.

"You ever seen me eat sugar after I get in a fight?" Billy said.

"No, maybe that's why you're always such an ass." Max shot back. She pulled out a strip of gum still in its foil. Partially unwrapping the silver, she handed it to Diane.

Diane took it and popped it into her mouth. The thought of gum from a questionable location made her stomach roil in fear of the diseases that could be lurking in there, but it came from an earnest Max and she was helpless looking into those big blue eyes. "Thanks."

Max smiled before it tapered off as an uneasy silence smothered the good mood.

"So what the hell happened?" Billy asked, cutting through the growing tension.

Diane and Max glanced at each other, and she caught the silent plea in the younger girl's eyes. But both of them were standing in the living room looked frazzled and with the look Billy was spearing her with, she doubted a cover up was going to work. He'd seen as much as she had this night, there was no point in trying to hide it.

As she turned back to Billy, preparing to tell him everything, Max spoke first. "Some animals tried to attack me— while I was walking with a girl from school by the road on the way home. Good thing Diane happened to be driving by at that moment. " She lied without so much as a hitch in her words, even followed by a judgemental tone that placed blame on him as Max knew him and Diane had spent time together prior. "She hit it with her car, but it just got up again so

she got out to distract it while we got into the backseat. Then she fell as she was getting back in."

If Billy thought it was a lie, he didn't show it as he flashed his teeth. "Did it now? You and your little girl friend really shouldn't be out this late. Which I know you know. It's good you're not hurt, now Susan won't have to worry her pretty little head over you."

Max narrowed her eyes, but didn't rebuke him. Fighting him now would just open up Pandoras box.

"What are you still doing in here? Don't you have you have something else to do?" Billy added impatiently.

With a scowl Max flipped him off and went to her room. His gaze lingered on Max for a moment, before turning his attention to Diane. He was giving her a critical one-over like he'd just done to Max. "Come on." He jerked his head towards the end of the short hallway.

She passed by a weight lifting bench with the cast iron dumbbell hazardously on the floor next to it as she followed him into the small bathroom. Diane waited for some comment tinged with mockery about how she was back so soon after they'd gone separate ways.

His piercing eyes followed her as she stepped over the threshold. "What really happened?"

He hadn't even been fooled for a second, despite how smoothly Max had lied. If Diane hadn't been there herself, she would've believed Max.

Diane was still mulling over why Max had omitted all the boys from her story when he leaned closer. His thumb trailed lightly over the bruise still blossoming beneath her eye with a feather-light touch that was a cool reprieve against the warm injury.

His lashes swept across his cheeks and for the first time she noticed how long they were, almost feminine in nature. Without warning his eyes flashed up to meet hers.

When he gave her even an inch of himself, she could tell by the defensive look in his eye that it felt like a mile. But her wild



appearance was slipping through his glacial barriers a mile high and she saw the apologetic look which sharpened into frustration.

"Doesn't look good." He hummed. The concern would be too obvious if he asked outright, so he took a detour in the form of an obvious statement. She was trying to solve the mystery of Billy Hargrove with the few puzzle pieces she had. Sometimes she thought she got closer to understanding who he was.

But then he seemed to present to her a full picture shallower than a puddle and she wondered if she was needing an answer from more than what was blatantly presented. As for what her question was, she didn't know yet. That question existed only in the shadows of her mind, nothing more than a quiet whisper lost in the wind.

"It looks worse than it is." She answered, voice wavering as she tried to sound nonchalant.

With the same ease he'd seen through Max's lie he saw through hers, evident in the quirk of his brow.

There was a flicker of movement from their periphery vision and their gaze broke. Max was staring at them, leaning against the wall. Her brows had flashed to her hairline as her eyes shone with disbelief. Slowly a crease formed between her eyes at the same rate she seemed to be stringing together several observations into a revelation.

"Didn't I tell you to scram? Go put on MTV or somethin'." Billy shut the door.

Max's train of thought was broken and she rolled her eyes before plopping down on the couch and hitting the On button with more force than necessary. *MTV News* was on, starting right on a new segment with the sound loud enough to flow through the door, "Allen Hunter with you and I'm way gone. I stayed up way too late last night, and I am definitely not feeling fresh . . . these are just some slang words, and this is a slang segment . . . "

It was on an obnoxiously high enough volume to make her point: she was very much watching TV.

Billy reached behind her, opening up a drawer and pulling out a plastic bag full of cotton balls and a metal pincer.

"Guess you were right about those little shits being out." He muttered; both his tone and expression were apathetic, like tonight's events were a mundane occurrence. But she could see the stress in the way his jaw was wound tight, and the way he was smoking through cigarettes like they were supplying him with oxygen.

"They wouldn't be able to sit still if you duct taped them to a chair." It wasn't his fault he'd underestimated them. Those kids were too smart for their own good. He placed a finger along the curve of her jaw, and gently guided her head to the side.

"Don't move, this is going to hurt." He commanded, and she gripped her hands on the counter behind her in preparation. The silence hung heavy between them. He was staring intently at her as the pincer hovered above a tiny shard of glass and her eyes slid to the small sliver of space beneath them. The hiss of the ember filled the apprehensive silence as he inhaled his half-way finished cigarette. "Tell me what happened."

Then he pulled out the first piece and her knuckles whitened. He dropped the first piece on the counter.

She told him everything. The scene with the abandoned car lot, the demon dogs — leaving out the part where she reached out towards one — the Upside-Down. That was what she was stuck on, still trying to wrap her mind around it herself.

A world that was still, technically, their world. One that ran parallel maybe, if she were to go with Steve's definition. She was rambling now as he set down another piece and his lip quirked.

"What?" She asked quizzically, pulled mid-sentence from her attempted Upside-Down explanation.

"I like when you look at me like that, Dobler."

Her brow furrowed.

"Like you think I'm smart." He set down another shard. His tone was

sardonic like it was balancing on a knives edge, dipping between seriousness or mockery and she was never quite sure if he was one or the other. Or it was for her to decide how to take his words.

"You are." The words came out so quickly and matter-of-factly they couldn't be anything other than true. "When you're not being a plagiarising, lazy ass and getting me kicked into detention."

"Well, if you'd just done what I asked, we wouldn't be here." He sang quietly.

She breathed a laugh devoid of amusement. "Yeah."

They tapered off into silence which lingered until it became an unbearable chasm for her; when she glanced up she saw he was already looking at her. There was the muted sound of what she assumed to be Max shutting the door to her room.

He was staring at her with a look she couldn't quite pinpoint, but she could see the respect that burned the ice away in his eyes. "You protected Max."

"She was going to get attacked— they all were. I couldn't just stand by."

"Course you couldn't." Then he gave a slight shake of his head. "Both stubborn as shit." He murmured almost absent-mindedly as he narrowed his eyes at a shard that was dug into her skin particularly deep.

She swore just for a second she saw the respect for Max that ran deep and she thinks she might be wrong about how he feels for his half-sister. He did care for her, thought Diane has a strong suspicion he'd rather die arguing he didn't care for her rather than admitting it for whatever bizarre reason. A lot of the actions he took were without logical to her.

"Thought you didn't like her." She said quietly.

"She's a brat. But she's also family now." He replied.

"But you don't have to protect her." Diane said quietly, trying to

gauge his reaction. He'd made it clear multiples time Max was nothing more than a hindrance to him, but she swore she'd seen the relief on his face when he saw her on the front porch.

He worked for so long in silence as he continue that she settled for the fact that he was ignoring her and she'd never get answers. Finally he muttered, "It's complicated."

It was an answer, at least.

"Promise you won't kill Max." Diane said. "I said I wouldn't tell you what really happened."

"You're supposed to strike a deal before you confess." He pressed a cotton ball to her cheek as blood welled up. She took it as acceptance that Max would make it alive until daylight.

"You're really good at this." She said with light surprise.

He shrugged. "Got some practice."

For all of Billy's brutish qualities, he had fine hands when it came to his current task. He plucked another tiny shard out glass with precision. In leu of flinching each time, her eyes kept watering over in pain. But keeping her face still as stone made his job easier. The shard plinked into the sink.

"Who knew there was a fighter in you." He said, so conversationally it nearly took her off guard. There was no hint of mockery or edged charm in his voice, just acknowledgement.

"Just because I can doesn't mean I do it."

He didn't seem convinced. "Everyone walks all over you because you what, sit back and let them?"

"It's not a big deal." She said curtly, feeling a certain defensiveness unfurl. By everyone is was clear who he meant. He hadn't even been at Hawkins High that long, but he'd already picked up on who went out of their ways to scorn her.

He looked mildly amused like he didn't believe her. "You left them

and what did that get you?"

"Not hanging around people who aren't nice. There's nothing I can do to stop them anyway." She shrugged.

"It's about being the strongest in the room, or others treat you like shit." He said and gave her a pointed look, like her whole life up until this current moment was the culmination of not getting her fists out.

"You can't just fight everything." She sighed in exasperation.

"That's a losing attitude, Dobler."

Diane rolled her eyes in response.

"Alright," he muttered as he re-focused, "this is the last piece. Just stay still."

"There was something I wanted to tell you." She yelped half-way between her sentence as he removed the last shard.

He looked at the glass, "What's that?"

"I wouldn't even have gotten in that car if it wasn't for you. Now I'm driving on my own. So, thanks I guess." She said, carefully watching as a bewildered expression sprang up on his face for half a second before it slipped off into stoicism. Then she gave a strangled laugh in the guise of a whispered breathe.

"It's just driving." He brushed off her words.

Diane couldn't help the slow smile forming on her face, eyes lighting up with mischief. He really, really couldn't take actual innocent compliments, could he? Beneath his air of arrogance was someone who was confused by genuine gratefulness. Guess brute force wasn't the only way to gain the upper hand.

"Yeah you definitely have a concussion." He gripped her chin and then moved her face from side to side, giving her a critical one-over. "Looks like it's fine. Sit on the floor."

"Now?"

He replied with a pointed look. Hesitantly she complied, turning her back to him as she sat down. He sat down on the closed toilet lid and redirected her head to look down. She yelped in surprise as he touched the back of her sensitive scalp and immediately went to protect her head, but he gripped her wrist. "I ain't fixing you up if you're going to struggle the whole time." His tone lacked any bite.

"Just give me a warning next time." She muttered.

But he didn't let her arm go, instead he moved it to the side as he examined it. His thumb traced the white scar on her wrist. "What's this from?"

"Don't know, I think I've always had it." She replied.

"We're not born with scars, they're made."

"Then I got—" she yelped as his fingers pressed against her head.

"I'm doing this as gently as I can, you're just sensitive." He murmured, partially distracted by his damage assessment.

"I'm not used to this kind of thing."

"Yeah I know."

"I'm not a doctor, but I think your head'll be fine." Then he stood up and reached out for her hand before pulling her up. "Think there's band-aids under the sink." He said before disappearing from the bathroom and around the corner. Diane wandered out towards into the living room. Max had gone into her own room. Next to it, she noticed the door slightly ajar.

Curiosity got the better of it and she nudged it open a little wider. It had to be Billy's room and she was drawn in, stepping over the threshold. The stereo was turned low and playing hard rock. Beer cans littered the table and the metal ashtray was nearly overflowing with cigarette stubs. There was a plastic radio on the bed stand and a lamp with a shirt thrown over it. Laundry was shoved in a pile in the corner, burying the plastic laundry basket.

When she'd passed Max's room, she'd seen her skateboard and a

seashell lampshade she'd brought with her from California. She hadn't caught sight of who was on them, but there were multiple framed photos leaning against the wall atop her dresser.

But here there were no photos, no seashells, nothing that was personal. There was nothing reminiscent of the past, or anything that showed his future. She didn't think she'd ever truly understand him, and she didn't think he wanted to be understood.

There was a creak and she whirled around.

"Found anything interesting?" He asked, leaning against the frame with crossed arms.

"Sorry." She answered.

He took a step inside, and if she took another step back, she'd feel the bed pressing against her legs. "If you're looking for more gum, check the second couch pillow."

"Do you believe in it?" She asked him.

"A bunch of kids saying the dogs come from an alternate dimension? No. And the fact you're entertaining this little idea is exactly why I don't hang out with kids." He said.

Then a small crease between his brows as he looked at the time on the electric clock on the nightstand blaring bright red.

She crossed her arms. "Of course you don't . . . I guess you had a funner night."

Then he closed the gap between them as that infuriating smirk began growing on his lips. "Interested, Dee?" He carefully put the band-aid over her temple. But his voice was serious when he answered, "Didn't go."

Relief began unfurling inside her, as soft and small as a daisy's first petals blooming. She responded with a noncommittal shrug.

"Now you're in my bedroom so I guess it worked out for everyone." He said. He'd been through as much as she had tonight and yet he

just seemed to navigate the rapids of otherworldly revelations like he'd been sailing all his life. He was unstoppable.

"Is everything a joke to you?" She asked.

"Not everything." He murmured, looking down at her.

After she'd shown up on the porch with Max he'd lost some of his usual sharpness. There was something more careful, softer in the undertones of his words. She realised suddenly that there had been something colder, more mechanical in his actions before like he was going through rehearsed motions.

Then the front door opened and Billy whirled around, taking a large step out of his room and Diane instantly followed. Closing the door behind them was who she could only assume were Neil and Susan Hargrove.

Susan Hargrove was like a wiry doe who's eyes flitted between the two of them and her husband, seemingly ready to flee at a moments notice like she hadn't quite decided that the environment she found herself in was safe yet.

Neil Hargrove stood with a back so straight he could only be a Vietnam War veteran. Everyone who came back to Hawkins had a rigid posture like that. They did when they were serious, at least, like an unconscious reaction. His hair was closely shaved and he had a moustache that was dragging down as his frown deepened as he took in the sight in front of him, eyes flickering between Billy and Diane.

Then Neil grabbed the remote from the coffee table and jabbed the black button, turning off the TV.

"Well, I hope we're not interrupting anything." Neil drawled with a small smile forming on his face that didn't meet his eyes.

"Nothing to interrupt, she was just leaving." Billy said curtly. They stood on opposite sides of the living room, neither moving. "We have Chemistry together."

"Is that so?" There was a dark undercurrent to his words, like a trap hidden beneath foliage ready to be triggered and ensnare its prey.



"Yeah."

"And this *girl* in our house is just here to help you with homework?" His voice was low and sharp as a whip.

Billy's eyes slid to the ground as the fire that always burned in them was snuffed out with one glare from his Neil Hargrove.

Diane bristled at Neil's words. It was evident that the word *girl* was going to be replaced with *whore* the second she was out of earshot. A prickling sensation sprang up behind her eyes and she blinked harshly before it threatened to turn into tears. His jagged words like shattered glass tore through her. An adult man — a father — was calling her a whore.

"Yes." Suppressed frustration was dredged up in his answer. "We were just finishing a group assignment together, that's it. I'm a little behind, Hawkins curriculum is different."

"At night, hm? Well, your sessions can't have been that productive because your grades are still so low." Mr. Hargrove said.

The air had changed in the room. It felt like an all-consuming storm on the horizon of Hawkins; the pressure in the air hung low and heavy and a deadly calm that surrounded them. But it came with the promise of explosive strikes of lightning and ground-shaking thunder.

"I'm sorry." Billy said.

"What? I couldn't hear you." His father's voice was saccharine sweet, a poison making its way through his system.

"I'm sorry, *Sir*." Billy answered, louder this time. Diane swallowed and felt his own hands beginning to tremble and Billy's shoulders drew inwards a fraction.

"You should be apologising to Susan. You were supposed to be babysitting Max tonight, setting a good example . . . don't even care enough to give your ol' dad a heads up before you throw a little party. Instead you've been spending your time on— what's your name?" Neil's gaze slid to her.

Billy's eyes only felt like a weak replica of the all-consuming fury that burned in his fathers eyes. That was the first time she understood what real rage was. It was destruction without end.

"Diane." Was all she could choke out.

"Neil, I'm sure it's fine. I'm sure Diane and Billy kept a good eye on Max." Susan said in a good-natured manner, but her voice cracked.

"Diane go home." Billy said, and the insistent look in his eyes had all the fight leaving her body. She nodded stiffly.

"Thank you for having me over Mr. And Mrs. Hargrove. You have a lovely house." Diane said, her voice sounding beside herself.

Neil glanced over his shoulder with a gentle scoff, like he was in disbelief she cared about his house at all. "Get home safe, Diane. Hope your folks aren't too worried 'bout you being out so late at night." Judgement coloured his words.

With a nod she exited the house, closing the door behind her. Her heart was hammering against her ribcage. As she walked away she crossed her arms tightly across her chest. Then she stopped.

Her keys were in Billy's jacket pocket. She hung her head. Why did this have to happen? She couldn't walk back in there again. Not if she had to face down Neil. Maybe she could just walk home.

But everything hurt and her house was on the opposite side of town. She took another step towards the road before she stopped, then turned to look at the house. She knew where Billy's room was now, she could just tap on the window and get him to hand her the keys.

It was the cowards way out. But Neil had clearly been upset with Billy having her over. Maybe he was getting grounded and her coming back would just incite a longer time washing dishes or without pocket money.

As she turned her back to the street and crept over to Billy's window, she didn't see the black van further down the road, vigilantly watching the Hargrove house ready for her to leave.

Diane crept along the weeds growing by the side of the house. When she was close to Billy's window she hunched down and made her way to the wall next to his room. Someone was yelling, loud enough to be heard outside the closed window. She flinched as something was thrown against the wall.

Peeking in the corner of the window she saw Neil with back turned to her shove Billy into the wall, his head rebounding from the force and teeth clacking together. Neil ran a hand through his hair like he was frustrated he even had to be doing this in the first place.

Neil was nothing but a puppet to his uncontrollable fury, and now the flames were leaping and crackling, desperate to find a new host to spread too. For years, that target had been his son with nowhere to escape to.

They made eye contact, dread in his eyes clashing with her horrified ones. Then she whirled around the corner and ducked before his dad could take notice.

Half of his enigmatic personality was ripped away with one blow from his father to the junction between his neck and shoulder. He wasn't just hiding bits and pieces of his life. He was hiding his entire childhood behind volatile doors.

*It's about being the strongest in the room.*

Now she knew why Billy didn't want her in the house.

There was a slam of the door. Diane was pressed against the wall with baited breathe. She should leave.

But she couldn't just leave him. What would he think if she just ran away?

If he wanted her gone, she would be. But she had to go in and see if he was okay. Her stomach was flipping again, but for a wholly different reason than the lab. The demon-dogs were predators that could be evaded, the men in the lab stayed there. But how could a monster be fought who lived in a small home where light cheerily spilled out at night onto the front lawn of a quiet neighbourhood?

After a long minute she crept closer to the window again and peaked in. Billy's door was closed. No one was there. Several of his clothes had fallen off their hangers and onto the ground.

She slid her finger beneath the crack in the window and lifted it upwards. Peeking in she saw he was at the corner of his bed, tense and hunched together, staring at the floor. He didn't look up as the window slid open.

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**A/N:**

**Crzychigurl343:** Protective Seemingly Apathetic Billy might just be the best description I've heard.

**MulishaMaiden:** I love Max she's so strongwilled and willing to fight for what she believes in. I think it's what Billy would've turned out to be without his dad. Oh yeah, they really are waiting to snatch Diane up and back to the lab which is bad timing with the Mind Flayer right beneath them ready to release an army of Demodogs.

**Runaway Fantasy Princess:** Here it finally is!

**Belovedfinch11:** All the way home? Hawkins Laboratory is nice enough to bring the party to her instead with a few guards and maybe even a cattleprod or two . . . they're just like bigger, angrier party sparklers.

**Pinkrainbow:** Ahhh I know, there's some incorrect facts in the earlier chapters. I'm trying to stay vigilant in fact checking and making sure all the other chapters past 6 or 7 is correct. When I have time I'm going back to properly edit those, but thanks for letting me know :)

Although disclaimer I do not know when that MTV segment came out, so I'm hoping that was before 1984.

**Fangirl0012345:** Clearly the only solution is to quit your job, it's unacceptable that it's getting in the way of reading this story. Who needs real money anyway?

**Amythyst Wolf 1999, Guests** thank you for your reviews!

## 19. Chapter Nineteen: Sharp Recovery

The room was cast in a veiled moonlit glow. Two shirts had been knocked down from their hangers, and a vodka bottle had rolled out of the closet. Out in the living room Neil Hargrove sat with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, glued to the TV playing baseball reruns. His rage had vanished as quickly as it had exploded.

The muted sound of cheering from the crowd resonated through the walls. Blue and white light flickered through the small crack beneath the shut door. Billy was hunched over at the edge of his bed. A string had been plucked and though the tenors of abuse had receded, leaving a vacuum of silence in its wake, they continued trembling felt but unseen.

She bent down and picked up the vodka bottle; the liquid sloshed against the sides. There was a deadly calm in the room and her steps towards him were slow and cautious against his unnerving stillness.

Unscrewing the cap she placed the bottle to her lips and threw her head back, taking a great big swig. Her face screwed up hard and she spluttered a little at the acidic taste.

"How can you drink this?" She murmured, eyes guarded. If he could glean anything from her expression he'd use it against her. She couldn't be leading this laconic struggle between them if she was busy defending herself. He had only looked at her once since she had come in, but had looked away so quickly his current state was undecipherable.

"By complaining less and drinking more." His voice held a rasp to it.

Diane held the tissue up to the bottle and tilted it, allowing the liquor to seep into the thin material. She took her time screwing the cap back before setting it on the ground. Just by coming inside, she was walking precariously on a tightrope that was already strained too tight. Too much pressure and it'd snap and she'd be in free-fall.

Wordlessly, she knelt down in front of him. His eyes remained downcast. From where his hair had so neatly been in ringlets this

morning, it was now a messy array sweeping over his brow. He straightened his posture with a stoic expression. For the first time, they were level with each other. His eyes snapped up, locking with hers. They held the barest tint of a scarlet hue, like he was viciously fighting off tears from forming. There was flickering darkness below the surface, though it wasn't devoid of any emotion. Rather, it's such a turbulent clash of every emotion, they'd mixed together to form a volatile darkness consuming him from the inside.

Corded muscles were like stone beneath the moonlight, yet she can feel the heat radiating from his body, burning like the fire that always seemed to be consuming him.

"It's not a big deal." It was a whispered growl with dismissive undertones, a powerful current hidden beneath uneasy waves. He was careful to keep his voice low enough that it wouldn't travel through the thin walls. "It's not, got it?"

He didn't bring up his dad. She didn't either. The look when their eyes had clashed earlier — he hadn't looked scared for himself. Something had shattered in his eyes, harsh as a bolt of lightning splitting a giant oak in half. He'd looked scared that someone had found out. But there was nothing wrong, was there? This happens everywhere. There was nothing to complain about, because nothing had really happened.

That's what he wanted her to believe. An illusion had been unveiled. Now he was trying to draw the curtain of normalcy back onto his life with every dismissal. She let him. But she knew with the same certainty the sun rose in the mornings and set in the evenings, that she hated Neil Hargrove.

Billy was a lot of things. But no one deserved that.

She slipped her hand into his, so delicate was her touch that there was still the barest sliver of space between the two. Even through the ghost of a touch, she can feel his tightly wound restraint.

"It was nothing." He said.

She was sure he was telling the truth, she was sure it was little

compared to what Neil was likely capable of. He hadn't just chosen her that day because he thought she was a pushover (though it was obvious he'd thought that too). He'd chosen her because he'd already known she was a safe enough bet to get good results from. She could deliver a grade his dad couldn't complain about. She didn't know whether he had sought her out in the library her because he'd been too lazy to work through the assignment himself, or whether he'd already known that he couldn't get a result deemed acceptable by his dad.

Her thumb skims over his knuckles, and his hand twitches like he wants to tear it out of her feather-light grasp, yet he's anchored to the spot through some unrecognisable force. It's a force so distant and lambent, nothing more than a lone star in the vast dark sky, he doesn't even attempt to understand it.

There's a small stain of blood growing beneath his shirt, skin tearing up from the small wound caused by Neil. His gaze catches hers, and she doesn't break it. Both of them know there's an injury hiding beneath his shirt. There's a certain glint in his eye, like he's waiting for a certain reaction from her. Whatever he's searching for, she's adamant she won't give it to him.

As she reaches for a tissue from the box on the nightstand, she continues staring right back at him. The tension between them seems to swell as they try to navigate who is going to move first. Perhaps he doesn't know it yet, but she's already won. This game isn't between who is going to act first, because it's his decision. It's his decision to allow her to see the injury, or to kick her out. Now she waits with baited breathe as he tilts his head upwards a fraction as he considers.

For all the way he seemed to be an immovable boulder entrenched in the middle of the tumultuous river of life, he was much smarter than that. There was a certain finesse in the way he moved, and there were still steps she didn't know. It was difficult when he always seemed to be two ahead while acting like he was strolling at the same pace as everyone else. Now she was moving with exceeding caution, gauging his expression to see if they he'd accept her silent command: *show me*.

His eyes lit with defiance like sparks of the first flames being kindled

by his challenge. There was a dare evident, fervent to be fulfilled. Let her see the damage then, from his very own father. Watch as she tears up with pity or looks away in disgust. She will, won't she?

Her fingers are careful but certain as she slides open a button on his shirt with a challenge gleaming right back at him in her gaze. But his hands remain on the bed as she parts the second one. He shrugs his shoulder downwards so she can slide it to the peak of his shoulder.

He seemed to have forgotten she looked worse tonight, and she hadn't run away from the image that'd stared back in the mirror. He was challenging her, seeing how far she could venture into the twisted undergrowth of his life that was dark and thorny and ensnaring to wayless victims.

She took in the damage with the pragmatism of a seasoned nurse at Hawkins Memorial Hospital. There was a tiny laceration in his skin where it'd tore upon impact with Neils ring. A blush of blue bruising was cushioning the cut. Her eyes flickered down to his own hands, to the three rings that gleamed in the moonlight languidly sliding between the blinds.

For a moment her hand hovered above the tear. They both know he could easily clean the injury — even ignore it without repercussion. When it didn't seem like he was going to renege on his challenge, she pressed the tissue on the wound.

His hand wrapping around his knee so tightly his knuckles whitened and the flare of his nostrils were the only indications he gave of pain as the vodka seeped into the wound, disinfecting the area with sharp vigour. Concern must have flickered across her features, fleeting as a gust of breeze rippling across a still lake, because he said, "I've had worse." His voice was a wisp of a drawl.

She dabbed at the edges. "I know it hurts a little. If you need something to hold onto . . . "

"You propositioning me, Dobler?" He rasped with flat eyes. But occasionally the deep humiliation would pierce through, with a current as powerful as an underground river, only witnessed through sporadic cracks in the jaggedness of his defensive expression.



"Isn't this what you're supposed to do after a night of drinking? I'm still getting the hang of this." She murmured.

Like the pain had already begun to bore him, he reached out moved the strands of hair that had fallen forwards behind her shoulder. His fingers brush against the exposed skin of her neck. While his touch is as light and innocent as her own had been, it sears like a trail of lightning. The sharp rays of teasingly innocuous touch pierced through her concentration.

Suddenly she's all too aware of just how close they were. She's aware of how her other hand had been unconsciously resting against the hard plane of his chest while she'd been tending the injury. She drops her hand, but the warmth is already seared into the side of her hand and it seemed to work its way across her skin quick as an inferno. Her initial confidence driven by determination was wavering beneath unfamiliar territory. Broad shoulders crowded her while his legs caged her. Now she felt like a doe who'd caught onto the trap it was about to find itself in, foot already on the gage, yet too light of pressure to trigger it — yet.

Sharpness had returned to his eyes as he'd found a goal on a path that had become so well trodden by him he could follow it blindly. If he was attempting to distract her from the palpable tension knotting through the room in favour of threading his own narrative, then it was working. The silence was quickly becoming unbearable, and she almost forgot why she'd been crazy enough to enter in the first place. Hopefully, she'd forget everything, like an artist wiping their canvas blank.

That grabs her attention and strengthens her resolve again. Of course he'd want her to forget, he was still trying to assess the damage that might be unfolding after she bore witness to what he kept hidden. It was so well concealed because he'd shove it so deep into a crevice of his mind. He only rarely passed it and when he did, it was on a level so shallow he skimmed by with barely any notice.

There were too many parts of him to mention at a glance she took issue with. And she couldn't fix him. It didn't matter, somehow. Not now. Maybe it would in a few hours, or tomorrow — even a few days from now. But right now, she could feel his hand brush the underside

of her jaw while she can hear the sports commentator yelling excitedly through the TV.

Now the words come pouring out in a jolted murmur, rushed but resolute in her offer. "If you want, when I leave . . . If you want— we had detention together. We served it, right? That's all we did. So, we just— . . . What I'm trying to say . . . I was never here if you don't want me to be."

She paused, and then rose up. He met her with silence. As he peered at her through his lashes, all variants of goodbyes died in her throat. Instead, she treaded lightly towards the window. She swung her feet out the window and twisted into a sitting position. As she slid out, she thought the pain of the panel scraping across her back was more bearable than the one that seemed to be dully beating inside her heart. But it was a pain she knew well. It was distance. Untethered and far away from those she interacted with. The disappointment crept up on her, quiet and certain as a shadow growing against the setting sun.

Ahead she only saw light pouring from the living room window. Max must've gone to bed, then. The house neighbouring the Hargrove's had already gone to bed as well, it seemed. The few lone crickets still out at this time of the season were chirping their last songs before the ground was blanketed with snow.

As she was holding low to the ground, keeping an eye on the windows above, she collided with a body. They stumbled into each other near the edges of the underbrush.

"Max, what are you doing— oh." Diane righted herself. That's why Max had gone to the car without a fight. Their little group had discussed this beforehand. If Diane managed to wrangle any of them back with her, they'd just reconvene later. Max was as good at lying, whether purposefully or through omission, as her older brother. "Which one of their houses are you going to? Mike's?"

Max crossed her arms. "Will's."

With the defiant look Max was levelling her with, Diane wondered if she'd even known what had just happened to Billy, or to what extent.

"Your brother—"

"Is going to be angry anyway, so I'm going to go help Lucas and the others first." Max said, undeterred from her mission.

A van parked inconspicuously between two cars down the road came to life with a flare of headlights and a gentle rumble of its engine. Diane whipped her head towards the street.

Five men wearing blue electrician uniforms jumped out of the van, heading towards her with measured steps. The blonde with the receding hairline stepped forward while the others flanked him. Max was shoved into the bushes, going down with an *oomph*. "Be quiet, don't move." Diane's lips were rigid as her gaze remained on the men. Max wasn't going to get involved in this.

Max must've sensed the urgency in Diane's voice, because there was not even a whisper of argumentation from her.

Their guns were raised and trained on her. There is uniformity in the way they all stare at her: like she's a deadly threat. Defenceless and unarmed, she raises her hands in surrender and one of the men's fingers twitches on the trigger, causing her to flinch.

The man leading the group had deep set distrustful eyes with swollen pouches beneath them. His mouth was an angry red line that hardened with intent the closer he got to her.

"Freeze." The man barked.

"I think you've got the wrong—"

"We know exactly who you are." He sneered, coming to a halt in front of her. The angry crimson birthmark on his neck looked like a misshapen heart.

He lowered his gun. As he holstered it he looks up at her, the ghost of a smirk forming. His fist swings out, connecting with her stomach with a thud. The air left her as her legs gave out. Hands took hold of her before her knees could hit the ground. Faster than his hulking stature perceived him to be, the guard spun around her.

Her hands were forced behind her back and cold metallic handcuffs slid around her wrists, locking with a sharp click. Two men on either side began dragging her towards the van, as her mouth opened and closed like a fish, struggling with desperation to breathe again. She was hoisted up into the back. The side read *Hawkins Power and Light*.

If there was an award for worst night ever, she was fairly sure she'd already been up on the stage to collect it without recollection. Too bad she didn't realise there was going to be an encore. They shoved her down onto the metal bench. Guards sat on either side of her as they leapt into the back without one word exchanged between them. She inhaled sharply, the first shot of air dragged down her windpipe with desperation. The doors swung shut. Her wary eyes darted between the men, and they gazed back at her with such cold and unyielding expressions they may as well have been wearing masks. Her chest moved in quick, shallow movements as she gulped in oxygen.

Sitting opposite her was the guard who'd punched her. He leered at her, "Try anything on me, or my guys, and there's a bullet in your head."

As they stare at her like she was a rabid animal moments away from lashing out, it had her thinking that maybe they're right. Maybe she is a threat. She just needs to figure out how.

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A/N: To spare everyone the details of my life: this did come out a few weeks later than anticipated.

Guest: That's so nice of you to say, thank you :)

Em: I love you and your supportive words.

Creation City Street: Thank you! Writing description is always a fun task, especially for this chapter since so much of the interaction taking place between Billy and Diane is silent.

Crzychigurl343: Diane's can't win a fight about strength on his terms, but she can change the rules of the game.

Belovedfinch11: Me too in all honesty. Neil's an awful human, and there's a chapter coming up where my soul withered a little at an interaction that'll take place between them. (Between the show's version and the reaction in this story, Neil was going to be out for blood regardless of what excuse he needed).

As for the Max and Susan thing this is definitely where his ability to completely disengage from Neil fails. His relationship with Susan is still pretty icy. I think he doesn't want to see that Susan is a victim as well (though she's a complex character too, it's just not as noticeable since she hides in the background of everyones lives, including her own). Because to call her a victim would make him a victim too, and I don't think he's ready to acknowledge that yet. But he loves Max even if he'll deny it. He would never risk her being alone with Neil — which puts him in the middle of Neils rage-fuelled war path quite often.

smokey-eyed amazon warrior: Steve is still in his Pre-Robin Era. Cool Babysitter Steve still has a few months to go.

ReidsLittleGenius: You're the Will to my Mind Flayer.

Bad boys, bad boys, what you gonna do, what you gonna do when *hawkinslightandpower* comes for you?

I-am-sarah123: Sorry. As the writer I really could've made him have a more pleasant time. I choose not to because torturing characters is fun.

MulishaMaiden: I see his character as being someone with high emotional intelligence, just not a drive to use it in a significant way (unless it involves maladaptive behaviour) or inhibited by his own impulses/anger.

Never trust black vans. Unless the side says it can get rid of student loan debts. They did kidnap her, and they are not nice people going to a not nice location. What better way for a character to experience an arc and change than throwing them into horrifying and terrifying situations?

Fairy: Stay alive until the end, it'll be worth it (or it won't and you

can write a scathing review on how I've ruined the ending).

Pinkrainbow: Just a temporary disappearance! I'm here to stay until this story is done.

Thank you rain-and-smiles musiclover246, Guest, GreY (I'M BACK!), and Runaway Fantasy Princess, New World Order for your reviews! :)

## 20. Chapter Twenty: A Warning in the Void

Since he could remember there was only silence and solitude that followed. He ached for the sharp taste of the clear bottle that followed the discipline tango he had perfected with Neil. He took one step forwards and daddy dearest helped him take two back, with the smell of liquor on his old man that drowned him from the inside and radiated from his pours. Bourbon. Always bourbon.

She shouldn't have come back. Her presence was tipping the scales of his solitude in a way that was painfully unfamiliar, yet any protest he had caught in his throat. Neil had never entered his room again after a night like this. But he could've, he still could. And Diane had been there. And he hated it, the way his throat seemed to close up so hard his vocal cords were frayed each time his old man came at him. His muscles were aching like twenty volts of electricity had shot through him.

There's a furious *psst* outside to call his attention and followed by a quick rapping on the wooden panels beneath the window.

That got him to stand up quickly.

What could Diane possibly want to talk about? Coming back was asking for trouble. While she'd caught him off guard the first time — when did that ever happen? — he found himself oddly transfixed at the uncertainty of it all. But it wasn't the first time she'd done so. She seemed to constantly throw him off balance.

Still. He wasn't going to risk her coming back. He'd seen the time on his bedside clock, knew Neil was going to come back with Susan in tow any minute. Yet he'd wanted to stretch the present into the infinite. He couldn't discern *why*; he didn't *need* anything from her. And then the exact scenario he'd tried to hide time from what happened.

And he feels like something twist in his gut as he saw Diane's stricken face while she watched Neil. All Billy could think of was rushing her out of the house; it didn't involve her anyway. And if he'd even try to tell his old man about what they'd gone through tonight? He didn't

want to think about it. When Neil was upset, the only thing to do was to go with the current.

But when he looked out the window it was a flash of red hair he saw instead of determined slate-grey eyes.

"I need to tell you something. Now." Max whispered.

He placed his hands on the top of the window, ready to slam it closed (not loud enough to risk agitating his old man). "No." Max had been isolated from his old mans reprimanding — as usual. She'd also been an instigator towards his old mans disapproval — as usual.

"Billy it's important."

"So's my beauty sleep." Which he was now in desperate need of. He'd had enough adrenaline releases tonight to catapult him into a coma.

The twig in her hair and a dried leaf at the tips of her hair caught his attention. They hadn't been there before. The air left his lungs in one forceful gust of frustration. Not only was Neil already pissed he'd found Diane in the house, but Max was planning on disappearing?

He *knew* his old man would blame him for that too. Something about how he was a bad influence on his precious little sister (*half* sister, but he knew better than to correct Neil). Though it was impossible to control Maxine because she did whatever the hell she wanted anyway.

"Fuck are you doing outside anyway?" He asks, though he already has an idea.

She glanced down at the street as she swallowed nervously.

He narrowed his eyes, then stepped back. "Hurry up."

With none of the grace of the last person who'd crawled through his window (what was next, a Jehovahs Witness?), Max hit the ground unceremoniously and he smirked on instinct.

"Did one of those dogs follow you back?" He asked. For a split second he was tempted to stick his head out the window. But he knew the



street had to be deserted now. If Diane had been in danger, then Max wouldn't have left her side.

Max was quick enough to pick up on what he really meant. By the double-take, she hadn't expected him to know about it already. But he already knew more than he wanted to, and with every new piece of information he learned about Hawkins the more it solidified moving to the Midwest had been a mistake.

"They're not dogs!" Max snapped impatiently at him. "They're not even from around here."

"Where're they from then, Michigan?" He baited.

"No, the Upside-Down, or whatever." Max answered him with a deepening scowl. Did everyone seriously believe in some fictional place? The fumes from the neighbouring mining town over must've destroyed everyones brain cells. Max's hands were moving restlessly in front of her. She opened her mouth ready to burst out vital information.

Before Billy could even respond to the knock on his door, Neil swung it open. "Have you seen Ma—"

Max gave a weak wave. "Right here."

Great. Again, she managed to drag Neil into his business.

Neil's glassy eyes flickered between them (thirty minutes to go before he passes out, like always). Max voluntarily hanging out together with Billy in his room was a rare enough occurrence to raise suspicion.

Max elaborated before Neil could ask. "He's — . . . helping me with homework. Bio. Biology." She elaborated, knowing Neil didn't pay enough attention to her school life to know what any of her classes were if she shortened their names. "I have a test on Friday. Just have a few questions since I'm still a little confused."

It wasn't the fine time she'd lied for him. He'd still be feeling a lot more appreciative if she hadn't contributed to the problem.

Neil's words were dripping with amusement as he placed his hands on his hips in disbelief. "And *Billy* is helping you?"

*Go ahead, get it over with, say I'm an idiot*, he thought.

Max nodded. "He's actually a really good tutor. Already helped me with my last assignment — on Monday. My Biology teacher said it was good."

"Teacher?" Neil implored, catching the way she was beginning to impatiently drum her fingers against her arm. Neil pretended to be clueless when it suited him.

Max shrugged. "Don't know his name. First week and all."

Neil made a noncommittal noise. Then his eyes flashed towards the window and back towards Max. "Didn't see you come out of your room." He acknowledged.

Meanwhile Billy continued to stand with crossed arms, eyes remaining on Max, only occasionally flickering to Neil. Max's room was in the hallway, but she'd still have to enter the living room to get to Billy's room. Which meant passing Neil.

Max shrugged again. "I got bored. Thought I'd try another way. Think I like the living-room route more."

Finding no bones to pick, Neil sighed. Then he pointed a finger at Billy. "You take care of your little sister."

Billy had to fight to get his voice to the perfect pitch. Too saccharine sweet and Neil would accuse him of being a sarcastic shit. Then they could begin all over again. Too grumbling, he'd tell him to lose the goddamn attitude. Then they could begin all over again.

Years of practice helped him hit the right tone. "Yes, Sir." He smiled as he acquiesced.

Neil scoffed as he left, letting out a soft chuckle, saying, "Tutoring."

The second Neil turned around — not bothering to close the door — Billy's smile dropped.

"Why are you still here?" He snapped at Max.

The words were rushed into one breathless sentence. "I was going to Will's and then they took Diane and she's in some van and I don't know where they're taking her but it looks bad and they didn't even look like police and—"

Billy strides across his room and hastily shuts the door. "Why the hell didn't you start with that?" He hissed.

"I tried but you wouldn't let me talk!"

"Who took her? What did the side of the van say?" He had a strong suspicion, but he needed confirmation.

"I told you she shoved me into the bushes. I didn't read anything."

She'd protected Max. The flicker of approval abruptly morphed into concern. She'd known something was wrong. "She just voluntarily went with them?"

Max wrapped her hands around her shoulders. "No. They hit her. But I swear she was cooperating—

"If you'd just turn the TV off when you left." His anger lashed out like a whip unfurling, snapping the air with warning. Neil probably wouldn't have gotten so pissed when he'd come home, and Billy could've at the very least walked her to the shambles of her car. And screw it, might even have helped her get home.

A few hours ago he'd expected to watch Diane get turned away at the Energy Department and laugh all the way home and into next week. But the whole shit show that had followed like a catastrophic trigger? The way her hand had squeezed his when they'd taken her blood had made him want to reach over and throttle the doctor's pencil thin neck between his hands.

Now there were abnormally large dogs that looked like they'd dragged themselves from the depths of hell, and some 'door' controlled by husks of Midwestern employees.

The children of the fucking corn were running amok out here.

"Everyone's meeting up at Will's house. They know what's going on. I think they'll know why they took Diane too." Max said.

*Not my problem.* He wanted to say. But the image of how she'd distracted the gunman had been branded into his brain with annoying resilience.

Diane had acted without thought. He knew how the world worked. People acted nice. Said one thing; did another. People didn't just do that — and not for him.

For a moment his world had sharply shifted and it'd taken him a moment to push it back into its glaringly harsh light. He didn't understand what she was doing. Everyone had something they wanted out of a situation. Every move involved grappling with power.

And that nagging voice in the back of his head that had started out as a whisper was growing stronger. Maybe it was purely selfless. Maybe, it was without motive.

Then his resolve went swirling down the drain. He was going to get her out. And she better not make a whole ordeal out of it. He just needed to get a little more information. Charm a few people (or browbeat them), and they'd serve him what he wanted on a silver platter. Following this would be a *friendly* little conversation with some hick administrative employees, and he would be done. Then they'd call it even.

No wonder Dee tried to avoid everyone; she was a lightning rod for trouble. That little bit of Irish blood from generations back seemed to be coming in handy, because he sure had been feeling lucky tonight in comparison.

And now he was sitting here being so absolutely useless he might as well be a vegetable. While some assholes were tripping around on power thinking they could kidnap whoever the hell they wanted. And he sure as hell wasn't forgetting anytime soon the fact that they'd dredged up files of his past and used it for blackmail.

Billy wanted the taste of copper on his tongue and the metallic tang

to perforate his nostrils. He wanted the dull ache of sore muscles. He wanted to turn around in the mirror and see the blossoming bruises knowing the other guy looked a hell of a lot worse than he did. He wanted to distract himself from mundane conversations the next day by glancing down at the red colour of victory burgeoning across his knuckles.

It was better than just sitting here. And wide-eyed Harrington being involved in all this? He had to see it to believe it.

"Fine. Come on." He needed someone who already knew where to go, rather than grappling with the map. "And I don't want any more shit from you tonight, got it?"

She narrowed her eyes and ground out a yes.

They only bump into Susan on their way out. Despite it being so late on a school night, she looks relieved they're hanging out together. She probably thinks they're finally bonding. If she knew the context, she would never have let Max go.

---

A deep breathe of concentration was expelled from her lips as the bandana blocked all light. Cross-legged on the musty bed, El gathers herself and hones in on what she's searching for. *Criss-cross apple sauce*, Lucas had once sang. But he said it in that way that sounded like a joke, but it wasn't a joke. It was *mocking*. That was another rule she learned from them. You liked the things you did now, but when you got older, you made fun of them.

The darkness is dredged up, light and inconspicuous as run-off rainwater at the edges of her subconscious. And then it rushes towards her all at once. It collides into her with such force that for a split second — like always — she loses her orientation.

She blinked harshly. She was in the Void again. A place where everything and nothing were all connected through unending darkness. The place where she found as quickly as she lost.

There's a layer of water on the ground, capturing objects like a distorted mirror. The shallow water eddies around the soles of her

sneakers as she begins moving, letting the invisible string pulling from deep within her guide her forwards.

An intangible force is pushing back against the movement she creates, and the ripples careen into stillness as quickly as she made them arise. The darkness was all-encompassing. There air was unnaturally still as she walked through the Void. It was like she was in a vacuum — like one of those black holes that Lucas, Will and Dustin had tried to explain to her before the boys had dissolved into jokes about black holes , and she'd wrinkled her nose and lost attention.

Hopper appeared at a control board. He was talking hurriedly. Dark circles were beneath his eyes.

Controls. Tunnels. Graveyard.

The hair on the back of her neck rose on reflex as she recalled the clinical white hallways of the Lab and the sharp smell of disinfectant which had made permanent residency in her memories.

It was a scream that made her whirl around as Mike burst into the Void. He was yelling, voice echoing around her like she was in a cavern so high and wide she couldn't see where it began or ended. But she could hear his voice, though he was nothing more than a spec in the distance.

But time didn't exist here and yet she was still in the painfully in the present.

Her feet were carrying her forwards before her mind could even catch on. Her jog turned into a run as she yelled his name, the high pitch of desperation clawing its way out of her throat. Her feet felt sluggish, and no amount of panic can seem to make her faster.

His yelling had leapt upwards with a frantic cadence.

He was lunging forwards against an invisible force, struggling against it like his life depended on getting through. "It's a trap! It's a trap!" He screamed.

El lunges towards him. She's *here*. She's right here. Its fine. Everything

was going to be okay. She'll protect him. She'll always protect him.

He was smoke dissipating between her fingers. No, no, no. Her heart was beating frantically against her ribcage. She missed him. She missed him more than anything else.

And — she was scared for him. (There were types of scared. People were scared *of* you. But you could also be scared *for* people. She learned that from her friends. They were scared for her when she got angry, like she was going to rip herself apart. Not like all the guards who had raised her, they were scared *of* her.)

El whirled around, desperate to see him again. But the darkness was absolute. And in its silence, it seemed to be mocking her, taking away the sight of the ones she loved the most on a whim, hiding them anywhere and everywhere. A nightmarish game of hide-and-seek she was destined to lose. Failing, always failing.

She calls into the Void and maybe, this time, if she's loud enough, he can hear her.

She was alone again, lost to wander through infinite nothingness.

Its infiniteness was constraining.

She curls her fingers into her jacket to remember what was real. The wind stirred in front of her from her own rapid breathing. The blood roared in her ears, fending off the silence. Her heart pounded against her ribcage, a strong steady beat of life. The metallic tang of blood coated her tongue from where she'd bit her cheek as she'd run towards Mike.

Her friends were in danger. They were powerless.

But she can do what they cannot — shouldn't — have to do. She can kill. They were the Bad Men and they were the Upside-Down and they were anything else that wanted to hurt her friends and Hop.

And Kali made her understand how to use her powers properly.

The quietness in the Void is deafening now. Dangerous.

She grows quiet as the fury already pulsates white hot within her like a star exploding. She holds onto that anger, kindles it into rage. And when she gets to Hawkins, she'll protect her friends. Her power will explode outwards and she'll tear anyone who wants to harm them apart. They are her family, and family protects each other.

Then she draws it all inside of her. There's no more screams. She's quiet now. The bad emotions that made the others worried for her she trapped inside. She welcomes it as a familiar.

But the fear is clawing through her and she can barely concentrate on her thoughts which scatter like minnows as she tries to grasp and fails to focus on one. When she feels like this, she remembers what Papa taught her. Sometimes he'd sit there in the rainbow room and his voice would swing lightly, like he was going to pick up into song. She could count on her hands how many times he'd sung it to her, and only ever after she'd had a particularly bad day.

The song is muted in her head, and her lips moves imperceptibly as she breathes the words. Her own mantra.

*Rig a jig jig and away we go*

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Her focus wavered and her breathing only become more shallow.

*Away we go, away we—*

No. It was something else.

A rhythmic, instant drumming that called the hair on the back of her neck to rise. It was like someone pounding on a secret door.

Someone — or something — wanted in, desperately, clanging with fervor. The sound echoed around her, bouncing off the darkness, ricocheting in her ears.

Then she's yanked from the Void.

And when she leaves to go back to Hawkins, she doesn't realise how much it hurts to lose her sister in order to save her family. She thought she could have both.



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Their bodies jostled against each other as they hit another speed bump. In the dim lighting, she could only see the occasional gleam of Edgar's teeth as he continued staring at her. Just a minute into the ride he'd introduced himself, and told her he only thought it was polite. She didn't answer back, and the constant hum of the engine was the sole sound in the uneasy silence. In the confined space she can smell his overpowering cologne Edgar had apparently doused himself in.

A few hours ago, failure had seemed like the worst possibility she could encounter. But somewhere along the way she'd been pulled into a nightmare, and she didn't think any amount of screaming was going to wake her up.

She wished failure was still an option, because that had meant she still had a choice. But the Lab had taken away free will by making her arrival at their gates an inevitability.

The van halted as they arrived at the Energy Department's external checkpoint. She didn't know how long these checks lasted, but by the growing restlessness of the men, it was longer than usual.

With a jerk they were moving again towards her final destination. Her stomach lurched. Still, there's one thing that soothes her. No one else was involved in this. Whatever this was, whatever they wanted with her? She wouldn't get anyone else hurt in the process — not because of her.

"I think we'll become good friends, don't you?" Edgar chuckles to himself, privy on a joke she doesn't understand yet. She knows she doesn't want to understand.

Edgar bangs the side of the van with the side of his fist. Another guard swings open the doors in response. They're greeted to orange lights lining the building flaring up at once. A second later, an alarm begins wailing.

Edgar's lips twist into a sharp smile at her expression before he grips her shoulder and drags her out.

This time there was an air of finality that was beginning to coil around her. She didn't think she'd survive the night.

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**A/N: I'm going to do my best to keep continuous updates on Tuesdays and Fridays.**

ReidsLittleGenius213: Shoving people into bushes is an unconventional, yet effective method of saving.

Anoni Mos666: Love the username, very Illuminati. And thank you for the compliments! As for cliffhangers, here's three little ones ;)

Em: Thank you!

Brownny Pink: Would you say . . . 50 whole shades . . . ? And thanks for that great compliment :) It sounds like you're in a rough spot waiting for chapters, so may I offer you another in these trying times?

Guest: I wrote the chapter because I knew you had a long shift.

## 21. Chapter Twenty-One: Back into the Fold

The treetops block the moonlight from filtering down onto the foliage. Steve, Dustin and Lucas trundle along the uneven terrain, dried branches cracking beneath their shoes. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted — as if the night wasn't already ominous enough.

"Okay, so it's a little longer than we thought." Steve said. The distance from the top of the hill down the lab had seemed shorter from their original vantage point. He was beginning to think it was never actually a small building close by, but a large building far away. Predicting distance had never been his strong point. That's why he liked the boundaries of the running track so much.

Steve thought they'd be moving at a normal pace, but when he'd looked up, broken from his thoughts, Diane and Max had disappeared ahead in the distance. Then Lucas had spotted the Light and Energy Department in the distance. Something was happening, and in Hawkins that meant Demogorgans and other DnD unmentionables. Of course they had to go investigate. It wasn't like they had much of a choice.

If Diane had been there, undoubtedly she would've barrelled ahead. That was the place she wanted to work at, after all. She was already so close to them she'd already been over there once before. Too much had happened tonight to keep track of anything other than survival. But when this settled down he'd need to warn her to stay away from the Energy Department. That's where they kept that kid, El. They weren't who she thought they were.

"We?" Dustin snorted.

"I told you it was like, two or three miles." Lucas said.

Steve shoved his hand into his pocket. The temperature was dropping fast. "Yeah, well, it looks like it's just another mile."

"If we're going the right direction." Dustin said.

"Which we don't even know because it's pitch black and we're in the middle of the freakin' forest." Lucas added.

"Okay I get it." Steve raised his hands in the air in exasperation. "Can't you just sing a camp song or something to pass the time?"

Neither Lucas nor Dustin were in the mood for singing. Firstly, because Steve Harrington was the one giving the suggestion and they weren't some choir boys ready to burst into song at any given moment. Secondly, it meant finding a song to sing, which meant talking to each other.

And there was still the unresolved matter of who Max *really* liked. Lucas already had a strong idea and he surmised Dustin was just in denial. But he wasn't going to talk about Max with Dustin. He wasn't going to say how she'd joined him on top of the bus and how she had confessed a secret to *him*.

Not Dustin, not Mike, not Will.

Him.

He'd sworn, as he was up there guiding Steve (well, yelling like a Staff Sergeant), he'd even seen respect flash in her eyes. "A man always takes care of those he loves. And it's my duty to protect our family." His dad always told him. Okay — he didn't *love* Max and she wasn't family. But he was a protector, like his dad. It was stepping up and taking on responsibility. No matter what, a soldier never surrendered. That's what he'd be one day, just like his dad had been before he'd retired in Hawkins. Lucas thought he was off to a good start.

"We should've just gone with Diane." Dustin said.

It wasn't something Steve could disagree with, but somehow he'd ended up with the majority of the kids. His conversation after Diane and him had hopped off the bus had been awkward and stilted, and he couldn't find the right words when it'd fast become evident she hadn't quite forgiven him for his past transgressions. Between Nancy and Diane, he was starting to think he was losing it. He didn't know when everything had become so complicated or why half the things

he said that usually worked, were now backfiring.

His paranoia that he was losing his touch only grew with each encounter gone awry. Any girl he spoke with felt like the recipient of his own, personal Midas touch. He was pretty sure that was the guy who turned things into gold . . . wait, that was a bad thing, right? Or was it good? He hadn't been paying attention — he couldn't even remember who'd been telling him that story.

"Well, you didn't." Steve said

"I know. Because we're blindly following *you*." Dustin said.

"Hey, I have a fun game we can all play." Steve pushed a branch out of his way. "It's called the silent game where you can see who can shut up for longest."

They continued steadily treading forwards, arms stretched out in caution for the trees around them. After a blissful minute of silence, Lucas broke it with a great restless sigh. "This game is stupid."

"Agreed." Dustin said, albeit grudgingly.

They might as well be a high school marching band with how loud they were. Out here, there was nowhere for them to hide. Steve's bat wasn't going to defend them this time if Darts friends came back to finish them off.

"Guys just quiet down a little, or we're all becoming meat-bags served extra rare." Steve said.

"Sure, staying quiet will help. Except for, you know, all the branches we keep breaking and all the trees you keep hitting." Dustin said.

Steve looked like he was at the end of his tether. "I almost—"

"You did. You literally hit a tree — not even five minutes again." Dustin said flatly.

"Almost." Steve argued. "I dodged it. At the last second."

"Not to mention that we're all breathing louder than Davie Hart when

he forgets his asthma spray at home." Lucas said.

"It's an inhaler." Dustin corrected.

Lucas shook his head. "You can also call it a spray."

"No, you can't. Because it's not called a *spray*." Dustin shot back. "It's an *inhaler*."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "*Whatever*, Dustin. I know what I'm talking about."

"Really? I didn't realise you have asthma." Dustin said.

"So what? Just 'cus I don't have asthma, doesn't means that—"

They continued bickering through the forest loudly. It was lucky for them that Dart and his pack had all gathered in one particular place, and terribly unlucky for the recipients inside.

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Despite the alarm, employees are milling about in the lobby in clusters. Scientists mingle with administrative and defence employees. It's a professional flurry of white lab coats, tailored suits and batons slung across hips.

A woman is running her fingers along her pearl necklace, sighing with impatience. Her head snaps up as she notices Edgar's unit striding towards her. Short black heels clack against the tiles as she closes the distance between them. The woman purses her lips at the state Diane is in, but doesn't comment. Her attention quickly turns to Edgar as she hands him a clipboard and pen.

"Evening Maryanne," Edgar takes the clipboard from her outstretched hand like she wants as little contact with him as possible, "sounds like a party in here."

Maryanne looks perturbed, but not overly concerned about the alarm. "Still waiting for the code. I swear if someones leftovers caught fire in the microwave again . . ."

With a sweeping signature, Edgar hands back the clipboard. "Still

haven't given it?"

"No. Clearly, someone's sleeping on the job." Maryanne replied, tucking the clipboard beneath her arm.

Edgar grins. "Hard to imagine they can focus with all this noise."

Maryanne's gaze turns icy as he corrupts her complaint. Without another word Maryanne turns on her heel, shoving the double-doors wide open.

Against her fraying nerves that worsen with every passing moment, Diane tries to pacify herself with that knowledge. The employees weren't looking particularly worried, and no one's received any messages on what the issue is. It probably is just a bit of smoke in the break room, or maybe someone smoking a cigarette in a lab they're not supposed to. The alarm was bound to turn off any minute.

Her nerves seem to snap, and then she's plunged into frigid waters. It's so piercing it freezes her to the spot. For a brief moment she's disorientated in how wrong everything feels, like the world's tilted on its axis. What she'd felt in the cell prior now only felt like a lingering shadow in comparison to how overwhelming the feeling was now.

Maybe it's the fear of the shackles on her wrists, escorted by a small army like she's a criminal. Or it's something else entirely. All possible answers she's trying to grasp at slip through her fingers like the final strand of smoke from an extinguished cigarette, and she knows she's seeking rationality in something she cannot explain.

"Keep walking." Edgar grunts as he grips her upper bicep with bruising force and forces her down a hallway. The other guards close in around her, like a barrier trying to contain her. The orange lights flash across their faces, and the shadows that leapt up and retreated across their faces twisted and turned their features into something nearly inhuman.

She'd read once that cooperating with an attacker gave the best chance of survival, a chance to escape when the narrow window of opportunity arose. Except Edgar wasn't attacking her, he was escorting her into a government facility. And if she ran, she doubted

there'd be a corner of the US where she'd be safe.

Maybe it was inevitable she'd end up here. She'd been circling this place her entire life. Everything she'd done, every memory, every decision, every thought, had been plagued with the shadow of this place. She hadn't noticed it until now, nothing more than a flicker in her periphery, disappearing if she tried to focus on it. She'd tried to shroud herself in shadows so she could be blinded with success. Well, she was right where she'd so desperately wanted to be her whole life, wasn't she?

Barely a glance is spared her way as she's brought to the elevator. They're all cramped together and the tip of a baton brush against her thigh as one of the guards shifts on his feet, hands laced together in front of him. She tries to lean away, and ends up feeling the leather gun holster of another guard against her arm.

The elevator gears whir as it heaves them up three floors. As the doors open, instinct has her digging her heels into the ground. The feeling of something infinitesimally worse looms over her and weighs her down.

"I said to keep walking. Maybe you should be thrown down in the tunnels for a night — learn your place." Edgar shoved her out of the elevator. "You can replace the guys down there and map out the rest of the system all on your own, make yourself useful."

He doesn't have to tell her what's lurking down there but she has a strong idea. That's how the demon-dogs must be travelling so quickly all over Hawkins, springing up from the darkness unseen. How long had the tunnels been there, right beneath their feet?

There's a light murmuring between employees crowded in the hallway as they glance around, trying to find meaning in the unending wail of the alarm. They give the guards as wide a berth as the narrow hallway will allow.

"Is she one of them?" Diane hears one of the scientists whisper.

They come to an abrupt stop and Edgar knocks on a door, already swinging it open before there's a reply. He pushes her in. Of the three



office desks inside, only one is occupied.

A portly old man stands up, readjusting his suit crinkling from too many hours spent in the office. In no particular hurry, he ambles towards her. He pockets his reading glasses and hums with disapproval as he gives her a one-over before turning his attention towards the guards.

Edgar appeared to have no problem leading the doctor to believe all the injuries marking her body were of his making as he raised a brow. "If you got a problem with how we deliver goods, take it up with my boss."

The doctors eyes flitted over Diane's face before returning to Edgar with thinly veiled exasperation. "I think I'll be taking you up on that offer."

"Yeah let me know how the paper work goes." Edgar said with a derisive flash of his teeth.

"You can uncuff her." The doctor says with an impatient wave of his hand.

For the first time, another guard speaks up. "We've been informed that the subject—"

"I'm well aware of who she is." The doctors tone is clipped, before he turns to Diane. "Do you harbour ill intent towards my wellbeing?"

She's shaking her head on instinct nearly before her mind processes his words. Imagining hurting someone was one thing, but the intent to go through with it was entirely another.

"You see, there's nothing to worry about. But for everyones peace of mind why don't you two," he pointed to two guards at random, "stand guard outside? If you hear anything suspicious in here, well, I'll trust you to do your jobs."

The two nameless guards glance at each other.

The doctor stalks towards his chair, sharply navigating around the desk. "Clearly, you find her dangerous. If anything happens to me,

you two gentlemen will be the first to have the last laugh, won't you?"

They shrugged, accepting his proposal. Someone gripped her arms and removes the handcuffs. The blood rushes back like the ocean desperate to greet the beach at high tide. She rubs her wrists, trying to numb the sudden sharp pain.

Edgar turns his attention back to Diane with a wink. "See you later, Experiment."

The wooden door blocks the worst of the alarm and the dimly lit office is a welcome reprieve. The doctor didn't have to scrutinise her to see her wide eyes and shallow breathing. He seemed to take some pity on her and he speaks in an amicable manner, but it does nothing to placate her.

"Guards, they're like dogs. You can give them a simple order, but cannot expect any nuance." He said as he opened a drawer in his desk, and plucked out a cough drop. "Want one?"

The soreness in the muscles of her stomach where Edgar had punched is a dull reminder of what the Hawkins National Laboratory is capable of. She shook her head.

The doctor leaned back in his chair, perfectly content despite the siren in the hallway. "I'm sure you have some questions."

One prominent, pressing question. "Why am I here?"

His eyes became distant as he loses himself in thought. "It's been quite the time since you were here last, so let me give you some understanding as to what we do here. When we first began it was difficult to secure the government's full support and funding. We were desperate for candidates to show them the effectiveness of this new form of — governmental instruments." He said. "Our co-workers wanted to showcase the potential of their project as well. The first three children came from our very own employees."

"My parents." She breathed.

He smiled. "Indeed. But ah, we ended up discontinuing the intake of

new participants."

"Why did you stop?" She asked.

"I'm not privileged to discuss that."

"What about why you let me go? Instead of just keeping me here?"

He sighed heavily. "Diane, — can I call you Diane? — for a brief year our scans picked up on altered brain waves, but then you were, well, simply put, normal. It was a pity. We had high hopes."

"If I'm useless to you, why bring me back?"

"I'm led to believe your abilities have remained dormant for years. You were dismissed quite early on; your trials always came back as the weakest. " He laced his hands together. "We're not sure why yet, but your initial diagnosis has changed. Why they have become active now is of interest to me — as I'm sure it is to you."

*My trials.*

Her stomach lurches. There were others, then.

"How many other experiments were more successful?" The more information he gave her the easier she could make sense of this jumbled puzzle.

"My focus is on you, Diane, no one else. My aim is to see what we can accomplish, *together*." He said.

"But I'm being forced to do this, aren't I?" She asked.

"Diane, we're professionals — scientists. No one is going to do something without your consent. Our goal is to make you feel like you have a place here." He said. The way he kept uttering her name was the crooning of a huntsman pacifying a skittish animal.

Her eyes dart around the enclosed space. The feeling of the handcuffs lingers on her skin. Here, consent meant forced cooperation. "You said I had altered brain waves. What did you mean?"

"There were signs of neurological excitement when exposed to the biological environment." He said.

That couldn't be right. She may have grown up surrounded by large swaths of forest, but she'd never felt particularly more drawn to nature than anyone else in Hawkins. She'd never had an overwhelming desire for owning pets of any kind, either.

Then there'd been the demondog. It had felt like a fragile, invisible string had been pulling them together and for a brief moment a connection had blurred the predator-prey line into neutrality. There had been an inexplicable draw to the creature, and its reaction was equally as unexplainable.

Everything she couldn't quite understand yet had only happened in the past week. "The pills you've given me probably prevented it." She guessed.

Immediately she regretted offering her opinion as the crease between his brow deepens. "What pills?"

"M-maybe it wasn't your lab. Just, you know, standard painkillers — usually I just got them from the apothecary."

In her rambling he loses interest. He glances out the window that oversees the dark forest. He cuts away from the subject and circles around another.

"Michael Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, and William Beyers have grown up with each other. You spend a lot of time with Dustin Henderson." He noted.

"I babysit for him. Occasionally." Diane said slowly as she tried to figure out where this conversation was headed.

"And how many encounters have you had with Participant Eleven?" The doctor asked.

"I don't think any. I've never even heard of him." Diane replied.

"Eleven has been seen around Hawkins by multiple witnesses. *She's* a grave threat to the citizens she encounters and we have every reason

to believe she's been manipulating fellow children to hide her. We need someone who can understand like a fellow participant does to help us find her and bring her back safely." He said.

Her brow furrowed. "I don't know how someone like that would think. I don't even know what's happening to me."

"Diane, you need to understand that that child is potentially dangerous. With a still-developing mind she is extremely mentally unstable. It is imperative that everyone in the facility cooperate to contain her. We can help her here. "

She snorted in disbelief. "Yeah, children are crazy. Their finger-paint art is a mess."

His face remained stern. "You did not have the ability to open up alternate dimensions and allow a creation that threatens humanity into this world."

She opened her mouth to retort but found no rebuttal. Everything that happened — that was one girl? Everything the kids had been telling her had been true.

Experiment Elevens upbringing must have been cold and clinical in the laboratories. How could they do that to a child?

But if that girl had been the one ensuring the destruction? Then she had inadvertently killed Benny, and those other missing kids, and Barb — god, *Barb*. And who knew who else that government had covered up? Who knew best what she was capable of, than the place that had created her.

Were they going to do the same to her, if she stayed here long enough?

"Are you going to kill her?" She asked.

His smile was tight. "I'm not in a position to speak more about Experiment Eleven at this moment. I simply wanted you to understand the dangers she poses to you, your family, everyone in Hawkins — the world. Everything we do here . . . it's all new territory. The participants in these studies can be dangerous, if not

handled correctly."

Participants like her. She dug her fingernails into her palm. After this conversation, was she going to be led underground and kept in a cell? How long would she be in there? She wanted to cry out that she wasn't dangerous. She wouldn't hurt anyone — well, she'd lashed out at Billy after all his provocations had been too much for her already fraught patience. He hadn't looked the slightest bit hurt but the guilt would stay with her for a long time. The guilt bubbled up like tar in her consciousness with what she'd witnessed at his house, along with her own lashing action.

"This . . ." She pointed to the scar on her wrist, the one she'd had before she could even recall, "does this have to do with the experimentations?"

He pulled the chair closer towards the table and nodded. "It used to be a mark, just a simple procedure for categorisation. Of course, with your latent abilities, it was decided amongst the staff to have the marks removed while you received a standard education during your formative years. You were still young enough that we didn't have to worry about altering any documentation for you."

They said they needed her. Wanted her to help find some other experiment. If she agreed to help, they'd need to let her out again, wouldn't they? All she knew right now was that she needed to get away from this building, and then tomorrow she'd figure out everything else, including who Experiment Eleven was. And if she cooperated, they'd need to tell her more about Eleven.

"I want to help you. On one condition." She said as the wailing alarm continues without respite. He laced hands as he leaned forwards; she had his interest. She pulled up her sleeve, exposing the little white scar on her forearm. "Mark me again."

Clearly he hadn't been expecting that by the way he grasped for an answer for a few seconds. Then, he broke into a small smile that didn't quite seem to reach his eyes. "Welcome back, Zero-Zero-Three."

Her lip quirked, like they were on the same page. The blood was roaring in her ears. "I assume there'll be more paperwork for me to

sign."

"You won't be expected to sign much more."

The more she cooperated, the higher chance they'd let their guard down, maybe even let her walk out of here on her own. Enemies made better friends.

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Alone in a sterile white room, she strips down to her underwear and hastily slips into the light blue hospital gown. Shaking fingers fumble with the strings in the back before she manages to cinch the gown together, pulling the knot extra tight around the base of her neck.

She bundles up her shoes and clothes and cradles them in her arms as she pushes down the door handle with her elbow. In the adjacent room are two computers on top of an electric board filled with knobs and dials. Two scientists were staring back at her.

Some of the scientists looked at her with piqued interest, and others with thinly veiled disgust. But all of them were the same, looking at her like she wasn't human.

They sit her down and order her not to move as one brandishes a tattoo machine attached to a long black wire that coils across the floor. The doctor giving her instructions not to move inside the MRI seem to float far above her as the handheld tattoo gun buzzes away. The ink sunk into her skin, black branded permanence of her experimental nature. The pain is distant in her distraction while the doctor wipes away the welling blood, placing white gauze over the finished result. 003.

The large, clunky white machine reminds her of the pencil sharpeners in every classroom in Hawkins High; of course the MRI has no crank. She lies down onto the bed as instructed before they strap in her, grey bands wrapping around her torso and legs. They push her forwards and slowly, she's swallowed by the machine. The enclosed space feels like it's shrinking in size and she swallows, staring up at the blank white wall as she attempts to steady her breathing.

There's an abrasive sound akin to rusty gears grinding against each

other. Pings echo around her like she's been transported to the arcade, surrounded by games beckoning her to come play. It whirs around her as it tries to figure her out. The sounds coalesce into metallic cacophony.

The lights flickered, then shut off, catapulting them into darkness. Energy hummed through the building as the emergency back-up system sprang to life, and the lights flickered back on. Running on reserve energy, they barely illuminated the room.

Stuck inside the MRI, Diane glanced around, trying to look down the mechanical tunnel for some insight. "Is something going on?" She asked, but was greeted with silence. She tried again, louder this time. "Is something wrong?" Her voice fights to be heard over the whirring.

There's a muted gunshot. Even through the door and against the blaring alarm she can hear a scream. She swears she hears the door open as the doctors presumably flee the room and she tries to twist and turn as she tries to find an angle to see what's happening. The orange light flares and wanes inside the MRI. The door must be wide open.

She struggled against the velcro binds. They begin to loosen with an abrasive tear. One leg at a time, she jerks out of the velcro grasp, before wiggling downwards, sliding beneath the bind that had gone across her torso.

The scientists had really fled the room, leaving her behind. She skirts the control panel and does a double-take as she sees the black-and-white images on the computers. That can't be right. Her brain was lighting up like clusters of fireworks on the Fourth of July. The machine had to have malfunctioned with the power outage. There's another scream and her eyes are torn away from the image.

She steps out into the hallway into the fray of frenzied terror. Papers are scattered across the floor where people dropped their files in a hurry to escape. The once collected employees are now struggling against each other, shoulders and elbows colliding as they round the corner in haste to escape the horrors that chase them with inhumanly keen senses. Someone is unloading an entire round from a rifle, and the steady flow of bullets comes to an abrupt stop. A yell escalates



into a scream before its cut off. The hallway becomes empty.

The alarm warbled, faltering in its unending warning. It dropped in pitch like the system was careening off a cliff. The alarm spluttered before it too fell silent. The lights flickered. Her hand flew up to cover her face as the light above her fractured and glass rains down. There's the inhuman, dry-rattling howl of a demon dog.

As she hastily backs up into the room, she trips over the snaking black wire and lands with a thud. Hastily she jerks forwards and shoves the door shut with her foot. She scrambles upwards and grabs her shoes, jumping around the room as she wrestles into them, hair swinging in front of her face.

There's the soft thud of paws and she freezes. Two paws in the form of shadows appear beneath the crack in the door. There's nowhere for her to hide.

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A/N:

Belovedfinch11: Max and Billy might still have a frayed (half-)sibling relationship at the moment, but they can begrudgingly put their differences aside to tackle the weirdness of Hawkins together. As for Edgar, I can't promise this chapter is the last you've seen of him.

AlphaSith: Fluff will follow angst!

nataliamontes13: thanks :)

Starwarslover: Please don't die

## 22. Chapter Twenty-Two: Easy Peasy

The road leading up to the Byers property had gone from well cared for by the State, to turning into the vestige of a road chipping away in neglect as it passed through their property line. A sloping clothesline dulled by the relentless four seasons of Indiana clung to a metal pole one storm from being blown away.

Billy kicked the tip of his boot impatiently into the dirt. "You sure someone even lives here? This shithole's one debt collection away from being boarded up."

"Yes." She snapped at him, for the umpteenth time since he'd asked.

He'd tried to look in through the unwashed windows, but A4 papers strewn across the glass panes obscured his view. What little he could see was a chain of papers that flowed over mismatched furniture and crawled up the walls. It looked like a mix between a crack den and some poor attempt at contemporary art. The prison bars on their windows weren't helping. In any case, it didn't seem like anyone was home.

With a few sarcastic comments from him and scowls from her, Max had caught him up on everything she knew in the drive over here. Against the darkness of the Byers home, it gave him some time to contemplate the night's events. Usually he didn't care whatever ill-attempted lie she'd come up with. But tonight was different.

Tonight was different from every way he was used to. It made him acutely aware of how the less he knew what was going on, the more he hated it. While he always knew his surroundings, he rarely acted on information unless he found it to his benefit. Now he was walking in blind to something he was still very much in the dark of the mystery that shadowed the dull life of Hawkins.

"So The Perverts little brother was targeted by a . . . Shadow Monster. And there's some girl who can throw things around, but only when her nose bleeds, who . . . saved everyone . . . with her mind. Now she's wandered off to get flapjacks, or something." Billy said, skepticism colouring his words. With every passing sentence Max

supplemented him with, he was more convinced this entire town was drowning in fumes from the mines. Either that or everyone was passing time between pumpkin tournaments huffing paint. It turned out, Hawkins residents were really just Goths in hiding.

"Pervert?" She wrinkled her nose.

"Jonny's pretty sick, takes pictures of girls when they're not looking. Don't think I need to tell you to stay away from him." Disgust curdled his tone.

He'd heard all about Jonathan Byers from Tommy who'd spared no details. What kind of freak snuck around peoples houses and took photos of girls undressing? Just buy a magazine like everyone else. Probably got some sick thrill out of it. "He even looks your way, tell me."

Max's eyes widened in alarm. "He won't. Don't do anything, okay?"

"Chill out, I'll just have a little chat with him." Billy said. So far his fellow Senior didn't appear to be home, and he had bigger fish to fry. But the older Byers sure as hell wasn't going to even be throwing a glance Max's way. If someone like Nancy thought Jonny perving on her was attractive, well, that sordid little affair was wholly their own. But if Jonathan Byers tried anything while he was around, that would make it Billy's problem, and in turn, it'd become Jonathan's problem. Billy had a quick solution to that.

"All of this is crazy." Max said as her mind tried coming to terms with everything she'd learned tonight. Especially when everything Lucas had told her wasn't some weird, elaborate prank. Wills older brother who she'd never even met before was the last thing on her mind, even if it seemed to be the first thing on Billy's. "Crazier than last Memorial Day crazy."

Memorial Day last year had been an event Billy often tried to forget, but he was fairly sure that day had been branded like hot iron into his brain.

"I told you moving would suck, didn't I?" Billy said. "They're bumpkins involved in some weird shit."

Max's face morphed into something akin to vague innocence. "You don't seem to mind interacting with the girls here, like Diane."

"Give it a rest, Max." Billy said, though she was only bringing this up now. He knew she'd continue pestering him only because it'd get a rise out of him — like everything did.

"Deny it all you want but I think something there." Her eyes glint with mischief as the corners of her lip threatened to curve upwards. Max had a feeling he was dissembling his combative logic, but had lived long enough with him to only have speculation as her shaky lead. Billy wouldn't stick his neck out unless he felt he had a good reason.

The way she'd been staring at him in the hallway of their new house was the look of a younger sibling catching the eldest red-handed. Before she could go on a whole imaginative journey he'd slammed the door. Of course she wasn't letting this go. "Yeah did Cosmo tell you that?" He jeered. "The Lord won't be happy with you revering that chick magazine like it's the bible, Maxine. You should be busy repenting instead of looking into things that aren't there."

"Oh my God, me and Mom went to church *one* time." Max rolled her eyes, which was her default response when her older brother started acting like an ass. Which, really, was most of the time. "And that was for Thanksgiving."

Neil had been away attending some security conference in Hemet, so mother and daughter went alone. Neil had given Max a Barbie doll with a bright pink sequined top as an apology for missing Thanksgiving. She'd phoned in how grateful she was, big-time. The Barbie was still shoved in a box somewhere beneath her bed.

Billy had refused to join, citing some clearly fabricated excuse, proceeding to make a show of chugging the rest of the beer in front of Susan. She hadn't pushed it. His old man would've given him an unforgettably stern talking to if he'd been there to see Billy's *disrespect* towards his newest wife. But Neil hadn't been there.

"And I'm sure it was about how thankful you were about joining our little family." He said sweetly.

Bringing up their disjointed family in the aftermath of Neil's reprimanding was like spark to flint, and it shot through him before he could quell it. Dust motes dancing in the soft hazy sunbeams in the cosy kitchen; steam rising from a cheerful yellow mug filled to the brim with black coffee; the ocean spray by the jetty with a surfboard that towered over him. He balled his hand into a fist and, glaring at the ground like he was trying to channel all the resurfacing memories into one oncoming well-aimed punch. That was what he hated most of all, the memories that pierced like shards through his subconsciousness.

He flexed his fingers, but didn't yet realise that it was nothing more than temporary tactics, as efficient as slapping on duct tape onto the ever-growing cracks of the dam where he kept all his emotions pent up. One day it would burst, but he wouldn't be swept away, helpless to do anything other than drown. Because another emotion still buried deep below the surface would be there, and he'd truly know what it meant to fight. He'd realise every brawl before was nothing more than a hollow victory, because he wasn't fighting for something.

For now? Well, he was willing to fight against anything that'd allow him control his emotions again.

"*Our* family, which is the reason I'm out here with you in the first place." He spat. They both knew he meant Hawkins, not the Byers. "I don't want to be out here and my care for whatever the fuck is happening ended right about yesterday."

Dismissing Diane left a bitter taste in his mouth in a way he didn't understand yet. They'd gotten thrown into something inexplicable together, that was all. Now he wasn't going to go the rest of his time in Hawkins with a book-smart townie lording it over his head that she'd saved Max — that was his job, whether he liked it or not. Him and Diane would call it even after tonight. And he'd get to pull one over the assholes at the lab who'd threatened him.

"If you don't give a crap just go home." Max burst out, the energy so great she shot up from her spot on the porch. "If I'm dead then you don't even have to deal with me anymore!"

He's ready to retaliate instantly, tongue sharp and trained to cut

down anyone in his path. But one glance her way has his shoulders deflating just as quickly. Max being angry is something he can deal with easily. Anger was the one language he was fluent in. But the raw look in her wounded blue eyes has him turning his head away quickly, like her expression could risk spearing him, breaking something within.

"I don't want you dead." He mutters, and his quiet lamentation was lost in the wind.

The silence that lingers with unspoken pain between the two is thankfully cut short as the meeting point Max had been insistent of the entire time finally appears to be taking place.

They hear vehicles racing across the uneven terrain before they saw them. The headlights jumped up and down across the potholes and came to a jerking halt in front of the Byers house. *Hawkins Police Dep.* was front and centre, with the second car following close behind. Both the Ford and Chevy were crammed with people hopping out almost before the cars come to a standstill. He'd expected the kids to show up, but he hadn't expected the whole cavalry.

Joyce and Bob hurried to the backseat, helping to usher what must be Will with the help of Jonathan and Nancy.

Chief Hopper was still in his car, fiddling with something in the front. Lucas couldn't help but break out into a small smile seeing Max there, waiting. It wavered for a brief moment before it dropped off back into a frown. Everyone looked concerned, horrified, or a combination of the two. Except for Steve, who eyed Billy with a weary expression. Billy responded with a dazzling smile that served to sour Steve's expression further.

Jonathon is carrying a limp Will in his arms, steps determined and fast as he makes his way to the front door, Joyce striding next to him with purpose.

Hoppers authoritative voice was the first to break the silence as the rest noticed Billy and Max by the porch. "You need to go home—"

"We already know about everything." Max interrupted.

Dustin is wringing his wrists as he seems to be drowning in despair, interjecting like he can't hold it in any longer. "He took Diane."

"Who?" Billy demanded.

Joyce is jabbing the key into the lock with an impatient force, instantly accepting the two newcomers who know what's really happening in Hawkins. She turns to Hopper as if he has the answer, "Yeah who the *hell* was that?"

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The shadows shifted as the demondog began crouching as if to peer through the crack beneath the doorway. Another muted gunshot echoed far away. The demondog screeched in response to the noise and bounded off. They responded to sound, then.

Only when the commotion outside seemed to have died down did she dare peak out into the hallway. With no signs of any demondog lurking around she crept into the hallway. Unsure of where to go she decided to take a left and go from there. Hurried footsteps starts up and Diane turns around just in time to see a female scientist with a stricken expression. With her lab coat billowing behind her, she shoves past Diane without regard.

No one cares she's an experiment now. As Diane turns into another endlessly long hallway she nearly slips on two manila envelopes that had spilled open, documents scattered across the linoleum floor. They had creased and teared as people had trampled straight through them. The camera lens that monitored the hallway had a bullet lodged in its centre, white cracks splintered outwards from the impact like a spiderweb.

She rounded the corner. The door to a conference room had been thrown off its hinges. Rob and Judith were there; they'd traded the blue electricians uniforms for suits. Judith is lying on the grey carpeted floor, face turned away from Diane. She's unmoving, and it only begins to dawn on her that Judith might be dead. The stranger from the Proud Stout with them.

Rob's mouth opens as he's struck by a sudden realisation the moment his gaze locks with her. "You're — "

The stranger shoots Rob in the head without a moments hesitation and he crumbles to the ground. His arm hit the floor, and his sleeve is hoisted up a fraction, revealing a small black tattoo on his wrist as his palm faces the ceiling. There were five petals and two wavering lines that arced through the petals, looking like a distorted, colourless rainbow. Perhaps a curving stream of water. But these thoughts are only speculative flashes in the back of her mind.

As the stranger lowered his gun, his gaze lit up with an animalistic excitement that was a dangerous concoction of gleeful and contemptuous. With his free hand he raked a hand through his ash-blonde, and the strands fell down around his temple and brushed the nape of his neck.

She rounded the corner. The door to a conference room had been thrown off its hinges. Rob and Judith were there; they'd traded the blue electricians uniforms for suits. Judith is lying on the grey carpeted floor, face turned away from Diane. Rob laid near the door, eyes staring up at the ceiling, unseeing. His arm was slung across his hip, palm downwards. The stranger from the Proud Stout with them. Now he was standing with a small cardboard box tucked beneath one arm. She only knew he had a gun because he'd pulled it out earlier in the bar.

He seemed surprised to see her. "Be careful, someone's taking opportunity in this lockdown." He glanced down at the two employees and frowns. "Did you know them?"

Her focus on uncovering a conspiracy had made her lose sight of the details of the stranger in the dim lighting of the pub. Against the harsh glare of the laboratory lights, she took in man with the shrewd dark eyes looking down at her. His skin had a pallor like he hadn't seen the sun for years, the contrast even greater against his dark grey suit. It was ill-fitting like he couldn't be bothered to have it tailored.

She knew she'd only been here once, at this very moment. A headache was blooming at the base of her skull as she registers her surroundings. It felt like she'd taken a photo of two different landscapes on the same piece of film. The overlap created hazy confusion and she stood frozen in the doorway, trying to separate real from imagined.



The stranger was looking at her in an almost expectant manner. All she could do was stare back, blinking rapidly like it would help sharpen her mind. Finally she forces out a stuttering answer, "N-no, I barely knew th-them."

His gun peaked out beneath his jacket, but he seems at ease and make no move to grab it. But he still has an imposing demeanour that forced attention wherever he was. And if he was a spy, she didn't think he was a good one. In silence, he still commanded too much attention.

Then he rips out the gun, points it at her, and shoots before she has a chance to duck. She raises her arms up in instinctive defence and screws her eyes tightly shut. He's stride towards her and the gun goes off twice more.

There's a beat's pause and she cracks one eye open. The stranger is standing next to her, lowering the weapon again. She looks over her shoulder to see what he was shooting at.

A demondog drew a final, shuddered breath before it stilled.

She hadn't even heard it creeping up on her. Her focus had been so wholly on the stranger in front of her, she hadn't felt that odd pull towards them. As she pats her body to feel for wounds, he holsters his gun again. She was unscathed.

The corner of his lips ticks upwards. "Had I known you were one of the experiments, Diane, and Experiment Zero-Zero-Three no less, I wouldn't have had our first encounter going down like that." The stranger said, putting extra emphasis on her name. He must work for the National Laboratory because he knows her name like so many of the others seemed to. The information of her experimental nature had spread through the building like wildfire, but the only one getting burned was her.

"Thanks." She breathed.

"You must be scared." He noted, sliding the weapon back into its holster with practiced precision.

His assessment took her off guard, and she could only find herself answering truthfully. First he'd threatened her and now he'd saved her. Uncertainty in where he stood only served to disorient her further. "I don't know what's happening."

He hummed, "I'm sure you don't. To be truthful, I'm surprised too. Here I thought you were as average as the rest of them."

The hair on the back of neck rises and all she can think about is how they need to get out of here. The stranger is a unique brand of terrifying in his efficiency with his weapon and calculating stare. But she was ready to bandy together with him through this terror to escape. His experience was a safe bet.

"We should go — get out of here." She said.

He gives a slight shake of his head in rejection and a faint smile like he finds her words endearing.

"I need to get something done urgently. You're not strong enough to join," his eyes flickered around the room, "watch yourself out there, it's everywhere. If I were you, I'd just hide. Oh, and if you find Experiment Eleven, take good care of her will you? Her time isn't done yet. "

Her feet felt like they were being dragged through molasses as the stranger strode around a corner. "No wait — hold on."

The building hummed as energy races through the wires again. The stranger was already gone as white light blinded the hallway. At the end was an unmoving guard, propped against the wall. Blood had soaked his uniform from where he'd been hit by friendly fire. In the distance was the whispered shriek of a demon dog.

Diane burst through the nearest door and spun around, shutting the door with her body. It was a dark supply closet lined with shelves nearly overflowing with cleaning supplies. As she backed up she hit the wall and a jug of industrial cleaner fell down with a thud.

Her breathing grew shallow as the walls seemed to close in around her. Everyone was dead or dying. It was blood and limp limbs and

lifeless eyes in an expanding graveyard. Through the maze of hallways and stairwells she'd already lost her chance to escape. Without a weapon and wearing a flimsy gown her chances of survival are limited. She was nothing more than an overzealous student with no friends, now involved in an experiment that'd been ongoing her entire life.

She couldn't punch her way out and she couldn't outrun the creatures that lurked through the corridors. She's not sure how long she stays there as she tries and fails to come up with any plan to get out alive. Each plan becomes more desperate than the next. It felt like nothing more than futile attempts at pretending like she was going to live to see the sun's first rays.

There's several raps on the door in quick succession and she jumps backwards. The knocking grows heavier before the door handle is shoved down. She scoops up the fallen jug in one hand, raising it above her shoulder right as the door swings open.

The man had his hands carefully in front of him like he was surrendering as he caught sight of her the jug she was gripping in her hand, ready to bludgeon him. "Hey — woah, easy there, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm Bob— Bob Newby."

"I— okay?" She was bewildered at this stranger who'd appeared in the midst of chaos with a soft voice and kind eyes.

"Joyce spotted you on the surveillance screens. Apparently you're not supposed to be here." He wipes away the sweat that shines on his face with the back of his hand in vain.

That woman was an angel in the midst of despair. Diane gave a shaky laugh that starts to sound like a sob and lowers her makeshift weapon. "I don't think I am."

She didn't know Bob, but she did know Joyce. Before Will could safely bike the distance alone, Joyce would pick him up from Dustin's house, and Joyce must've known how much she was on her own, because every time she'd invite Diane over for dinner. Every time she declined, citing schoolwork.

It wasn't homework, she just didn't want to spend an awkward dinner based on pity and trying to dredge up conversation with Jonathan that extended beyond small-talk. He'd made it clear to everyone years ago he was happier left to his own devices, so everyone left him alone, her included. Their draw to solitude allowed them mutual understanding in skipping painfully superficial conversation. It was the closest they'd gotten to friendship, and she was fairly certain he'd like to keep it that way. Diane trusted Joyce, and Joyce trusted Bob.

"I know there's a lot going on, but we're going to help each other get out of here," he said with a shake of the walkie-talkie. "We just need to get down a few floors and out the front door, then we all go home. Easy-peasy, right?"

A voice crackled through the staticky radio. "You guys need to move quickly now. Take a right, it'll lead you into the stairwell. It should be an easy out from there."

"Doctor Owens." Bob supplied. He must have seen the hesitation on her face and gave her a look of reassurance. "He's one of the good ones, promise."

She wasn't sure any of them were good, but the situation was dire enough that she'd need to stake her faith in Bob's words. She hoped he was right for both of their sakes.

They stay close together, nearly bumping into each as they make their way quickly and quietly to the stairwell. They pass a dead scientist sprawled down the steps, her face was lined with terror that seemed to petrify in death. The small relief she feels knowing that the next body isn't her mom is overpowered by the sickness at the way she's tallying victims off the list. She knows her parents aren't here. And yet, she's not sure she knows anything anymore.

Then she grips onto Bob, preventing him from taking another step as she glances up the stairs.

She can feel it.

One of those creatures is with them in the stairwell.

"Stop." Owens says a second later. They were stuck on a landing between floors. "You got company, four floors up, and it's moving fast. You'll have to shoot it."

Bob looks down at his hands, and his face sinks with dread as if the gun he thought he'd been holding had vanished from existence. A frustrated whine slithers down the stairwell like the creature is disappointed it once again finds no live prey. Bob quickly turns down the volume of the radio and presses it against his ear. He searches for the surveillance camera and waves his empty hands.

"We don't have a lot of options left. There's a free lab if you can get to the second floor, third door on the left." Owens said. "Hold on . . . it might be leaving the stairwell . . . "

Something whispered to her that it wasn't going to leave. It was going to explore each landing. They won't be able to outrun the demon dog once it realised they were in close vicinity. For now, their silence was saving them, but it could only buy them so much time.

The jug weighs in her hand and she's surprised she was still carrying it. Warning signs litter the base of the bottle. Inside one of the black boxes is a symbol representing fire.

She makes the motion of flicking a lighter. Although he looks befuddled as to her reasoning, he understands her request and begins patting himself down. They didn't have any weapons to defend themselves, but maybe they could make one.

*Hopper*, he mouths with relief as he finds a lighter in his pocket. He'd held on to it for a brief moment for the chain-smoking Chief, and promptly forgotten about it.

As she moves closer to the stairs, Bob shakes his head rapidly. They were going to get out, together, just like he'd said. She silently implores him to trust her, eyes widening in an earnest manner. If her plan didn't work, well, their situation couldn't get any worse. Lines of worry are etched into his face, but he knows they're running out of options and time.

Diane tiptoes up the staircase, staying away from the spiralling

centre. She removes the cap and lowers the jug to the ground, pouring the pale green liquid across the landing. The stairwell becomes covered with intersecting streams and the acrid scent has her cupping her nose and mouth as she moves down the stairs. It runs down in uneven vertical lines along each step.

Every step she takes back to Bob Newby is treaded with exceeding caution until she's standing right next to him. Taking the lighter, she runs her thumb along the metal. A spark is produced, but no flame. She shakes the lighter in frustration and tries again. The demondog becomes alerted to their presence with a howl and bounds down the stairs.

The lighter sparks and over and over again as she demands fire. A door is slammed open as a demondog bursts through, the clash reverberating against the walls. The second joins it, flanking its left side. Flame leaps from the lighter, and she throws it onto the landing. Fire erupts and the demondogs jump back just as they reach the landing. They circle the steps, trying to find an opening in the flames to no avail.

Both of them let out the dreaded breath they'd been withholding. It was working for now, but the flames were inhaling the toxins with an enthusiastic greed. Diane and Bob jog down the stairwell against the frustrated cries of the creatures that hunt them. She nearly hits Bob in the back as he stops on the ground floor, listening intently to the radio.

"Nice job. Now stop lingering and get out." Owens says.

The corridor is empty and they pick up their pace. Bob shoves the door open and the lobby is deserted, save Joyce whose worried expression breaks into sheer relief at the sight of them. Joyce was standing by the door in turquoise scrubs looking disheveled, but otherwise fine. Outside, Hopper and Mike were kneeling next to Will who was resting against the brick wall.

Hope shone its first rays and Diane's heart fluttered in response. They could get out of here. In the morning, all of this would become nothing more than a distant nightmare. Joyce threw her arms around Bob, clinging to him tightly like she was scared he'd once again slip

through her grasp.

Joyce's brows suddenly knit together in confusion and she looks past Diane. The doors swing open and the familiar overpowering cologne hits her like a break before she has time to turn around. In three strides Edgar has his arm hooked around her neck, dragging her back. She lets out a cry as her hands fly to his forearm, trying to pull it away from her throat. Edgar shoots two bullets into the wooden door adjacent to them and they duck in response to the deafening sound of gunshots. Hopper is already raising his shotgun, turning his back to Will and Mike. The Chief's calculated gaze flies over her as tries to find a vulnerable point in which to shoot Edgar.

But Edgar was moving fast and using Diane as a shield, it was too risky to shoot without harming her as well. The sound lures the demondogs back and as Edgar pulls her into the vacant hallway, three more burst forwards from the adjacent door, knocking it off its hinges and bounding towards the glass. Diane loses her footing against a stray pearl on the floor.

Bob pulls Joyce outside, shutting the door just as the creatures smack against the glass. Joyce's yelling is indistinguishable; she thinks it's her name. The doors swing shut just as she sees two more demondogs join the pack, cutting off her chance of escaping. Hot breath hits the side of her neck in short exerted pants. "Shut up or you'll attract those animals."

With a gun digging into her side and the threat of the demondogs surrounding them she bites her tongue. As he pulls her around a corner she knows she's hopelessly overpowered against the sheer strength he's exerting. It doesn't stop her from kicking her feet out, hoping the momentum will slow him down. But she may as well be weightless with the ease he's pulling her deeper into the building.

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A/N:

Crzychigurl343: There's a lot of stories out there where completely-average-girl becomes the superpowerful-chosen-one, so I'm trying to veer away from this trope (not that I'm complaining, they're fun to read too). I think I'm going to keep El as the powerhouse and have

Diane develop her abilities that complement her wit.

Billy's on a slower development path so I agree he doesn't deserve her yet. I'd originally just planned on around 100k and finishing this story, but his character ended up becoming so guarded and stubborn that I didn't find it realistic enough for him to have a change of heart immediately. Then more characters (which'll play a larger part later on) have been quietly moving around in the background and now this story is expanding into its own little universe.

Anoni Mos666: While I'm striving to do Tuesday/Friday updates, my uploading is still sporadic so I can't blame you for missing any chapter updates. Good catch with the pills plot line ;)

I don't want to spoil too much but I like your theories and will say her parents certainly play a part in her medication, and their absence will be explained later on. Right now it seems like finding out about her involvement in MK Ultra is only negative, but her ignorance might've set her up for a worse fate.

Runaway Fantasy Princess: El and Diane will both be distant with each other for different reasons. Diane who'll continue hearing about how destructive and dangerous El is (which ties into Edgar's anger), and El who's hindered by her guilt in leaving Kali. But they're both tied together through being experiments, so all's not lost yet :)

MulishaMaiden: Not only grudgingly teaming up with Max, but now grudgingly teaming up with the rest of the gang, including his best friend Steve. As for Diane, I don't think this night will make it into her top ten best memories. She's in full survival mode.

.2019, 1Demoness, thanks for the reviews!